

During the 2006-2007 school year, National History Day invites students to research topics related to the theme *Triumph & Tragedy in History*. As is the case each year, the theme is broad enough to encourage investigation of topics ranging from local history to world history, and from ancient time to the recent past.

To understand the historical importance of their topics students need to ask questions about time, place and context; cause and effect; change over time; and impact and significance. Students must consider not only when and where events happened, but also why they occurred and what factors contributed to their development. Description of the topic must also include an analysis of information and conclusions about how the topic influenced and was influenced by people, ideas or events

For National History Day

2007, students are encouraged to select an individual, idea or event and demonstrate how and why their topic was a triumph and/or a tragedy in history. A student may choose to focus on the discovery of penicillin as a historic and medical triumph. Or students may decide to study the tragic impact of the Great Russian Famine of the 1890s. In these cases, the subject could be presented as either triumph or tragedy.

Students should keep in mind, however, that often the same topic can be viewed as both triumph and tragedy depending on the experience of the participants, the perspective of historians and the passage of time. One person's triumph was often another person's tragedy. For example, the American Civil War was a great triumph of the North over the South, of unionism over sectionalism, of freedom over slavery. But the war also took a terrible toll in human lives, caused widespread destruction and left a legacy of bitterness. In all wars and military encounters there are social disruptions and material costs-winners triumph and losers experience tragedy.

In explaining this paradox to students, perhaps thinking of a balance scale that is heavy on one side would be a visual image that would represent Triumph

& Tragedy in the research. A topic will not be balanced equally with triumphant moments or tragic moments but one will weigh in heavier than the other. Nudging students to uncover both sides of any event helps build historical perspective and constructs a stronger historical argument.

Securing the peace can be as difficult as winning the war. The Marshall Plan resulted in the United States sending billions of dollars in food and equipment to Western Europe as its nations struggled to overcome the economic devastation and tragedy of World War II. Was the Marshall Plan a triumph for the western

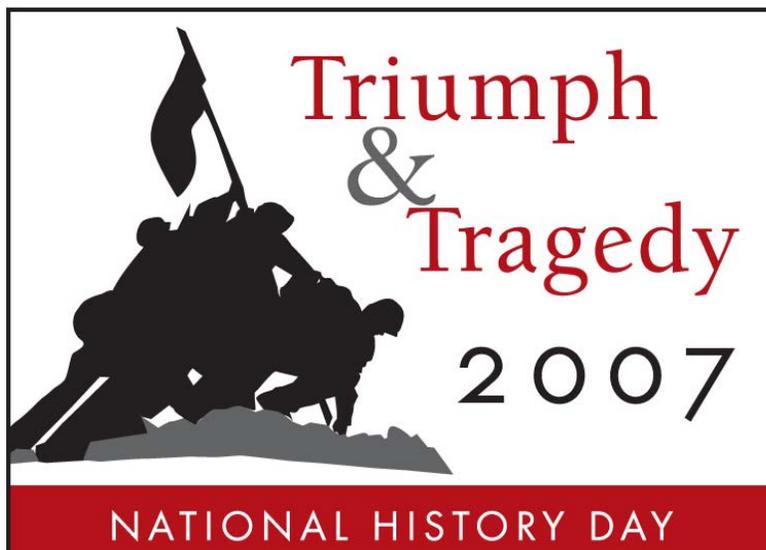
European nations that participated? Was the Marshall Plan an economic triumph for the United States? Was it a political triumph?

Why or why not? How did the Marshall Plan differ from the reconstruction plans of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe? While military topics to be obvious choices because of the generally clear line between winners and losers, Triumph & Tragedy may be explored in a wide variety of historical contexts. Students who are interested in ancient history

might create a project that examines the architectural triumph in the building of the Parthenon in Athens and the tragedy of its use as a military arsenal and fortress in the centuries that followed. A performance might be developed that examines the life of Julius Caesar and his triumphant rise to power as well as his role in undermining the Roman Republic.

Was his assassination considered a triumph or a tragedy by his contemporaries? By historians? Or students might produce a media presentation which interprets the destruction of Pompeii when Mt. Vesuvius erupted as a tragedy for the people caught unaware, but a triumph for archaeologists almost two thousand years later who excavated the civilization preserved in Lava.

Students interested in historic places might explore places in their own communities that possess tragic and triumphant associations. Whitman Mission National Historic Site, for example, tells the story of Marcus and Narcissi Whitman, their Methodist mission in southwestern Washington, and their massacre in 1847 by Cayuse Indians. Whether an event is considered a tragedy or a triumph depends on one's perspective.



Other National Park Service sites that reflect these opposing themes are Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site in Atlanta, which chronicles Dr. King's triumphant rise to national prominence and his tragic death in Memphis; Little Big Horn National Monument in Montana where Lakota and Northern Cheyenne led by Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse defeated George A. Custer in 1876; and Booker T. Washington National Monument in southern Virginia which illustrates Washington's rise from slavery to become founder of the Tuskegee Institute and one of the foremost black educators at the turn of the twentieth century.

An individual can affect a historic development that is both a triumph and a tragedy. Gandhi led India to independence with his strategy of passive resistance triumphing over violent protest. But the victory of anti-colonialism was accompanied by the tragedy of Moslem-Hindu conflict. An individual also can experience public triumph and personal tragedy. Frederick Douglass, a slave, experienced the triumph of escape and freedom, becoming a distinguished lecturer on abolition and equal rights for blacks. But in his daily life Douglass continued to suffer from the tragic legacy of racism.

The world of politics and foreign policy is filled with examples of triumph and tragedy. A paper might be written which examines the effect of the Japanese colonization of Korea between 1910 and 1945 and the subsequent acrimony between the two nations. A media presentation might be produced that explains the appeasement policy of the British and French toward Adolph Hitler in Germany during the late 1930s and the tragic consequences that followed. Or a project might be created which analyzes Benjamin Franklin's success in gaining French recognition for American independence in 1778 and the consequences of French military assistance during the Revolutionary War.

In migration and immigration there were those who triumphed over the odds and others who met tragic fates. In the settlement of the American West, for example, pioneers struggled against elements, the land, and sometimes each other to carve new homes and communities out of the wilderness. Conversely, Native Americans fought the pioneers' encroachment onto the land and the changes in their livelihoods and culture brought by the advance of white settlement.

Students who are interested in sports might develop a performance which dramatizes Wilma Rudolph's struggle to overcome personal tragedy and historical circumstances to triumph as an Olympic athlete. Or a student who is interested in civil rights issues might write a paper that analyzes the efforts of the Freedom Riders to register African-American voters in the early

1960s and the eventual passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The history of technology includes scores of topics related to triumph and tragedy. A comparison might be made between the San Francisco earthquakes of 1906 and 1989. How did the tragic consequences of the 1906 quake contribute to new knowledge in engineering and design that helped to lessen damage in the 1989 disaster? Another topic for study might be the efforts of the Wright brothers in their attempt to create the "flying machine," or Chuck Yeager's role in breaking the sound barrier. Students who are interested in inventions might consider investigating the development and impact of the telephone by Alexander Graham Bell or the light bulb by Thomas Edison. What makes one inventor triumph while another fails?

The theme is a broad one, so topics should be carefully selected and developed in ways that best use student's talents and abilities. Whether a topic is a well known event of world history or focuses on a little-known individual from a small community, students should be careful to place their topics into historical perspective, examine the significance of their topics in history, and show development over time. Studies should include an investigation into available primary and secondary research, an analysis of the materials, and a clear explanation of the relationship of the topic to the theme, *Triumph & Tragedy in History*. Students should pay special attention to the possibilities of triumph and tragedy within the same subject. Then, students may develop papers, performances, documentaries, and exhibits for entry into National History Day competitions.

As with any NHD theme, this topic presents students with many fascinating opportunities to explore history and to learn to use a wide range of primary and secondary sources. This year's theme also offers teachers an excellent entry into philosophical discussions about personal actions and responsibilities.

Stories of individuals in history are compelling but pose a challenge for a National History Day project. While working with a theme, students must move beyond biographies and description of specific people or events and demonstrate how that person's actions affected history.

The challenge for students engaged in a National History Day project with the theme of *Triumph & Tragedy in History* is to capture that specific moment in time in which change occurred that changed the course of events and forever altered history.