

THE 38th PARALLEL: DIVIDING A NATION

GRADES: Middle School

SUBJECT: Geography, Social Studies

TIME REQUIRED: One to two class periods

OBJECTIVES:

1. Understand the background and formation of the 38th parallel
2. Identify ways in which a divided Korea continually impacts its population

MATERIALS REQUIRED:

- Copies of appendices A and B
- Wall map or atlas of the United States of America

BACKGROUND:

One result of the end of World War II in Asia was the division of the Korean Peninsula by the Allies. In order to fully understand how the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea operate in today's world, one must look at how a previously unified country was split into two countries, each with differing ideological viewpoints.

Prior to the end of World War II, the Japanese occupied Korea and imposed numerous hardships on the Korean people. When the armies of the Soviet Union in northern Korea and the United States in southern Korea forced the Japanese out of the country at the conclusion of the war, the Korean people thought they had reached the end of their troubles. However, neither of these two powers was willing to accept the other's domination of Korea. In 1945, at the Cairene Hotel in Cairo, Egypt, the matter was finally settled, although somewhat arbitrarily. Rear Admiral Matthias Gardner of the United States pointed to 38 degrees north latitude on a map of Korea and suggested that a border be applied there. So on August 15, 1945, the Soviet Union forces accepted the surrender of the Japanese north of the 38th parallel, and the American forces accepted the Japanese surrender south of the 38th parallel.

A military rule was established while efforts were made to unify the county under one government. The efforts of various countries and the United Nations failed. In 1948 the Republic of Korea was founded in the south while the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was founded in the north. The 38th parallel became the border for both countries.

On June 25, 1950, the military of North Korea invaded South Korea and the Korean War began. United Nations Forces (including American soldiers) waged war with South Korea against North Korea, which received military aid from China and Russia. Finally, in 1953, an armistice agreement was signed on July 27. Neither side won the war. They simply agreed to stop fighting. Korea remains a divided nation to this day. The demarcation line ended up on and around the 39th Parallel. A zone two kilometers on either side of the border was established as the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone).

Today this DMZ, four kilometers wide, runs across the Korean peninsula. It is a forbidden stretch of land marked with barbed wire fences and signs, although recently there has been more movement of goods and people across the barrier. The citizens of both countries are, with few exceptions, not allowed near the area, and it is heavily patrolled by the military of both countries. Villages, families and friends have been split by this line on a map, which in reality has had terrible consequences for the Korean people.

PROCEDURES:

1. Pass out Appendix A and locate the Korean Peninsula on the wall map, globe or atlas.
2. Go over the background material with the students, helping them understand how Korea became a divided nation. In this discussion be sure to do the following:
 - Include the story of how the 38th parallel was used as an arbitrary man-made border in 1945.
 - Point out North Korea and South Korea on the map of divided Korea.
 - Show the difference between the actual 38th parallel line assigned in 1945 and the border now in actual use.
 - Discuss the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone), giving the dimensions in kilometers and equivalent dimensions in miles.
3. In small groups, or as a large group activity, ask the students to brainstorm ways in which the DMZ and the closed border have affected the Korean people. For example: families are divided on either side of the border, trade between North Korea and South Korea has been halted and all transportation between the two countries has stopped. Have the students consider the various themes in geography (i.e. location, place, human/environment interaction, movement, regions, etc.) in their brainstorming.
4. Share the small group findings with the class using chart paper, board lists, etc.
5. Pass out Appendix B and ask the students to identify the states and to divide the country into two sections using the 38th parallel already drawn on the map. Using the map as a guide, ask the students to again apply various themes of geography and see how the American people would be affected. For example:

Ask the student to identify goods that would no longer be readily available such as citrus fruits for our northern states, since the bulk of them would come from states beneath the 38th parallel. Ask the students to identify tourist areas that would be off-limits to them such as ski areas in the northern states and Disney World and Disney Land in the southern states.

This exercise can be also be used to start the lesson, as a motivation to get students to start thinking about the implications of division. Having established how dramatic the impact of the division would be in the U.S., then move on to Appendix A and the division of Korea, as established in points one to four.

EVALUATION:

Grades should be based on the students' comprehension of the lesson, participation

and oral presentations.

ENRICHMENT:

Compare/contrast Korea as a divided nation to the United States during the Civil War. Differences in philosophy, government and economics, among other things, kept the North and South apart. Was the United States divided during that war for any of the same reasons that Korea is divided today? While a "38th parallel" did not exist in that war, help the students understand the Mason-Dixon Line and what crossing that line meant to escaped slaves.



