



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1996 Volume I: Multiculturalism and the Law

Playing the Race Card

Guide for Curriculum Unit 96.01.09
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This curriculum unit was developed for high school students in a Contemporary Law course, but it is intended for use by any social studies or history teacher that teaches issues that are based on race and racism in American society. The intent of the unit is to acquaint students with two famous trials in which race was a factor and to explore the question, “When is race an important factor in the American justice system?” Are people who are members of a racial minority able to get the same legal rights as other citizens? If there are inequities, what is being done to “send a message” to our police departments, lawmakers and judges?

The curriculum unit is divided into three major parts. The first part of the unit serves as an historical background to the legal cases. This narrative is designed to be used as a reading assignment for students at the high school level. A Sample Lesson Plan provides ways to get students to examine reasons for the existence of racial prejudice in America and to become more aware of historical events that have altered the effects of racism. As a final exercise, students are asked to examine crime statistics which reveal some startling conclusions about race, victims and arrest rates. Armed with historical facts and actual statistics, do students see the need to act to reduce racism in their schools and communities?

The second and third parts of the unit discuss race as a factor in the criminal trials of Bernhard Goetz, the “subway vigilante,” and of O.J. Simpson. Race was very much played down in the Goetz trial, and very played up in the Simpson trial. The key question we ask students to determine of Goetz is whether or not he was justified in shooting his four black assailants; was he acting outside the parameters of the law, or acting in self-defense? Lessons have students role-play the jury selection process, with role cards for jurors and legal strategies for lawyers. Teachers are also provided with instructions to complete a three-to-four day mock trial of Goetz.

For the trial of O.J. Simpson, the unit includes a two-page summary of important dates in the trial, a brief summary of the issues raised by the trial, particularly the choice by the defense team to “play the race card,” and the conflicting theories of guilt and innocence that each side presented. Why are Americans divided over this verdict, particularly along lines of race? We explore the reasons for and the attitudes behind our reactions to the jury decision by examining the “second verdict.” What were the messages sent and received by this high-profile case and what have we learned from it?

(Recommended for U.S. History, grade 11; African-American History, grade 12; and Contemporary Law, grade 12)

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