

King James Trash Talks and Taxes Tobacco

History nugget

In 1604, King James I of England wrote *A Counterblaste to Tobacco* which concluded with the following:

Have you not reason then to be ashamed, and to forbear this filthy novelty, so basely grounded, so foolishly received and so grossly mistaken in the right use thereof? In your abuse thereof sinning against God, barming your selves both in persons and goods, and raking also thereby the marks and notes of vanity upon you: by the custom thereof making your selves to be wondered at by all foreign civil Nations, and by all strangers that come among you, to be scorned and contemned. A custom loathsome to the eye, hateful to the nose, harmful to the brain, dangerous to the lungs, and in the black stinking fume thereof, nearest resembling the horrible Stygian smoke of the pit that is bottomless.

Europeans had been exposed to tobacco as early as 1560 and used it primarily as medicine. At the time, people believed that tobacco treated or cured many illnesses such as headaches, stomach problems, coughs, epilepsy and cancer. In the following decades, tobacco use among Europeans dramatically increased, not only for medicinal use but also for recreation. For many rulers in Europe, including King James I, tobacco smoking represented a major social and health problem. English leaders did not make the sale and smoking of tobacco illegal, although many other European countries did, including France, Russia, Sweden and Switzerland. Instead, King James I tried hard to reduce tobacco usage, not only by writing *A Counterblaste to Tobacco* but also by introducing a massive tax increase in 1604. The price increase, however, did little to reduce English demand for the “noxious weed.” By 1614, the Virginia Colony, which King James had approved, was shipping tobacco, and production rose sharply in the following years. Ironically, tobacco cultivation would lay the foundation for the success of England's American colonies.

Instructional strategies

1. Provide students with a copy of the handouts [King James Trash Talks and Taxes Tobacco](#) and [Anti-Smoking: Then and Now](#). Have them work in groups and then debrief with the whole class. Have students share their insights about historical and modern ideas about tobacco.
2. King James attempts to curb tobacco use with an anti-tobacco campaign and increased taxes. It did not work – use went up anyhow. Have students work in groups to consider a current example of an official tobacco policy (e.g., no smoking on school grounds). Have them discuss the following questions:
 - a. Does the policy make sense? Why or why not?
 - b. Is the policy working (or likely to work)? What factors might contribute to whether or not the policy achieves its goal?
 - c. If you could make official rules about tobacco (or another drug), what would they be? Why? How would you enforce the rules?
3. Provide students with a copy of [A Cash Crop for Virginia](#). Have them work in small groups (one representing the King and his advisors, another representing Rolfe and the Virginia Company Board, and others representing various London newspapers) to prepare for and hold a press conference in which the reporters can ask questions of King James and John Rolfe.



Curricular competencies

- Use Social Studies inquiry processes and skills to: ask questions; gather, interpret and analyze ideas; and communicate findings and decisions
- Assess the significance of people, places, events and developments at particular times and places
- Determine what factors led to particular decisions, actions and events, and assess their short- and long-term consequences
- Make ethical judgments about past events, decisions and actions, and assess the limitations of drawing direct lessons from the past

Drug literacy objectives

- Assess the complex ways in which drugs impact the health and well-being of individuals, communities and societies
- Explore and appreciate diversity related to the reasons people use drugs, the impact of drug use and the social attitudes toward various drugs
- Recognize binary constructs (e.g., good vs bad) and assess their limitation in addressing complex social issues like drug use
- Recognize how official reactions to drugs often have less to do with the drug than with other factors
- Develop social and communication skills in addressing discourse and behaviour related to drugs