

# AWARDING VALOR

GRADES: 7-12

SUBJECT: American History, Civics

## OBJECTIVES: Students will:

- Define and provide broad examples of acts of valor (in the military and beyond)
- Describe the purpose and basic elements of the Congressional Medal of Honor
- Brainstorm and examine additional, potential, and/or unidentified “heroic” acts that might merit the Medal of Honor
- Extend the parameters of the Medal of Honor to include a broadened base of acts that could merit recognition
- Analyze the treatment of minorities in the military, particularly during World War II, and its influence on the awarding of the Medal of Honor
- Examine and report on historic and current race relations in the armed forces

## STANDARDS: Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

- **Civics:**  
27: Understands how certain character traits enhance citizens’ ability to fulfill personal and civic responsibilities
- **Historical Understanding:**  
2: Understands the historical perspective

## MATERIALS:

- The film *American Valor*
- Television and VCR
- Chart paper and markers
- Sticky notepads (one each per discussion group)
- Picture, drawing, or actual Congressional Medal of Honor
- Computers with Internet access
- *American Valor* viewing chart
- Medal of Honor fact sheet (NOTE–WILL BE IN “HISTORYOF THE MEDAL” SECTION OF SITE)
- Medal of Honor statistics (NOTE–WILL BE IN “HISTORYOF THE MEDAL” SECTION OF SITE)

**ESTIMATED TIME:** At least 10 classroom periods to cover both activities (students can conduct some research outside of the classroom)

**BACKGROUND:** To become acquainted with the Medal of Honor’s history and parameters, refer to Medal of Honor: History and Issues [http://www.mishalov.com/Medal\\_Honor\\_History\\_Issues.html](http://www.mishalov.com/Medal_Honor_History_Issues.html). This piece might be a good primer for students (with some modification for younger grades). Additional sites providing essential background information are The Official Site of the Medal of Honor <http://www.cmohs.org/> and Home of the Heroes <http://www.home-ofheroes.com/>.

## PROCEDURES: (Activity 1)

**1)** Divide students into small groups. Distribute one sticky note pad to each. Write VALOR on the chalkboard or chart paper. Ask students to discuss the term, writing one-word or short-phrase associations on separate note pad sheets (one word/phrase per sheet). For example, heroism, bravery, saving a life, etc. Have one person from each group post the terms on a classroom wall or the chalkboard.

**2)** Invite the class to review the postings, removing overlapping terms/phrases. As they review the collection, have them brainstorm umbrella categories under which associations might be grouped. For example, one category might be service to the public, under which students would, after discussion, group select terms/phrases. Based on the terms/phrases, have students offer a definition of valor.

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3) Building on student associations and definitions, provide a definition of valor. (If desired, provide synonyms, which include gallantry, heroism, valiance, valiancy, bravery, courage, and courageousness.) Some definitions follow:

- *Strength of mind in regard to danger; that quality which enables a man to encounter danger with firmness; personal bravery; courage; prowess; intrepidity.*
- *The qualities of a hero or heroine; exceptional or heroic courage when facing danger (especially in battle).*
- *A soldierly compound of vanity, duty and the gambler's hope.*

4) Invite students to briefly present stories of valor with which they are familiar and/or to name any awards for heroic acts. Introduce students to the Congressional Medal of Honor, displaying the award (actual or a visual representation). Probe student familiarity with it (what it is, who receives it, etc.). Provide background on the medal. Distribute the Medal of Honor fact sheets and statistics for students to review. Students should jot down questions they have about the medal or additional information they would like to know.

5) Instruct students to conduct additional research on the Medal of Honor (and make sure they find answers to the questions they noted in Step 4). Students may work individually or in pairs or small groups to find answers to all or several of the following questions (some may be modified or eliminated for younger students):

- *When was the award established, by whom, and why?*
- *Who typically receives the award? How is the recipient identified?*
- *How many award recipients are there, to date?*
- *How many women have received the medal?*
- *How many people of color have received the award?*
- *Under what special circumstances is the award issued? Describe several of these situations.*
- *Can civilians helping to fight in combat be eligible for the medal? Explain.*
- *What changes have been made to medal provisions over the years? Why have these changes been made?*
- *What mistakes have been made when awarding the medal? How were these errors corrected?*
- *Describe instances in which the medal was used abused.*
- *Has the medal ever been awarded to the same person more than once? List examples. Can this still occur?*
- *What privileges do medal recipients receive?*
- *Have there ever been controversies concerning the award and its recipients? Explain and describe.*
- *Have there been situations when a medal has not initially been awarded but then is issued later on? Provide examples of when this has occurred and successes and challenges involved in this reconsideration process.*
- *Describe situations when the award was taken away from a recipient and then reinstated.*
- *What are some of the issues around awarding the Medal of Honor to people of color?*

6) Invite students to share and discuss their findings, recording any outstanding questions they may have about the medal's history, provisions, and recipients. Chart student questions for later discussion.

7) Tell students they will watch *American Valor*, a film based on interviews with medal awardees. Explain that most award recipients are no longer living, and that of those surviving, only several agreed to be interviewed for the film. Distribute the *American Valor* viewing chart that students can complete as they watch the film.

8) Have students share their thoughts and feelings about the film, discussing what stood out for them (final activity on the viewing chart). Invite them to discuss the similarities and differences among the narratives. What is the most common sentiment regarding the medal among the interviewees?

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9) Applying their research on the Medal of Honor, the various facts and statistics regarding the award, and the stories presented in *American Valor*, have students discuss whether the award's current parameters are inclusive of all potential acts of bravery. If they believe so, have them present an argument supporting this premise. If not, instruct them to add or revise provisions to make the award more inclusive (i.e., perhaps civilians assisting in combat might merit a medal). Invite students to share their arguments and/or revised parameters.

**Activity 2:** 1) Have students review the American Valor segments that highlight Vernon Baker and George Sako. Tell them that as they watch, they should note the experiences these soldiers had as people of color in the armed forces during World War II. (Students can log onto this site's short bios of Baker and Soto, as well as their medal citations.)

Engage students in discussion about Sako and Vernon, using some or all of the following questions to prompt reflection. Why were they treated differently from their White counterparts? How were people of color being treated nationally prior to and during the war? When did these and other soldiers of color receive their medals? What prompted this action? Probe students about this treatment and its connection to the essence of civic duty and racial equality as stated in the Constitution. In what ways was this treatment contradictory to democratic principles?

2) Point out to students that, because of racial discrimination, it took nearly 60 years for 29 African-American and Asian-American heroes to be recognized for their actions in World War II. They were finally honored, many posthumously, at ceremonies at the White House in 1997 and 2000. Discuss with students why it took so long for these heroes to receive their awards.

3) Divide students into small groups representing the various arms of the military — Navy, Air Force, Army, and the Marine Corps (depending on the number of students, there could be at least three groups per category). Assign to each group per category an ethnic group to research—African American, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Latino (these are the primary groupings; students may opt to select other under-represented parties).

4) Instruct the groups to research and chronologically chart (perhaps an annotated timeline) the treatment of their ethnic groups, within their assigned military divisions, during major wars in which the US was involved (Civil War, World Wars I and II, and the Korean and Vietnam Wars. This list can be extended, if desired. Refer to Lesson II for additional wars.) Their findings should include the following (students should be encouraged to add additional categories as they conduct research):

- *Units in which these groups fought (segregated? Integrated?)*
- *Specific duties to which they were assigned*
- *Treatment they received (from rank to awards)*
- *The policy units of the armed forces established regarding minorities*
- *Who received the Medal of Honor and when*
- *Steps minorities took to establish equality in the armed forces*

5) Invite groups to share their chronologies/findings. Have groups discuss any differences and similarities in the way the groups were treated during the armed forces; during which time periods racial equality seem to be addressed and established; whether there are other minorities who served in the armed forces who merit a Medal of Honor; and what they believe the present status of racial relations is in the armed forces.

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6) Instruct students to research the present-day treatment of minorities in the military. One way to begin is to review the Armed Forces Equal Opportunity Survey ([www.dod.mil/prhome/docs/r97\\_027.pdf](http://www.dod.mil/prhome/docs/r97_027.pdf).) Have students write an official military report or a journal essay on current racial relations in the armed forces.

Students can quiz each other on their understanding of the Medal of Honor's provisions and history. (Or, issue a teacher-created questionnaire that quizzes students on their knowledge of the medal.) Use a rubric to assess level of student participation in group activities and class discussion. Students can critique each other's arguments in favor of keeping the award's parameters as is or their proposed changes to the award's provisions.

### EXTENDED ACTIVITIES:

**Students can:**

- Create a pamphlet of other military awards (history, what it honors, who receives it, visual representations, etc.)
- Redesign the Medal of Honor
- Conduct research to determine whether anyone in their community has ever received the Medal of Honor and establish a memorial in their honor

### WEB SITES:

**Home of the Heroes**

<http://www.homeofheroes.com/>

**Official Site of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society**

<http://www.cmohs.org/>

**Military Awards**

<http://facstaff.uww.edu/rambadtd/homepage/legion.htm>

**Medal of Honor Citations**

<http://www.army.mil/cmh-pg/moh1.htm>

**The Medal of Honor: The Bravest of the Brave**

<http://www.medalofhonor.com/>

**Air Force Magazine Online: Valor**

<http://www.afa.org/magazine/valor/>

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

From classroom instructor to an executive director, Michele Israel has been an educator for nearly 20 years. She has developed and managed innovative educational initiatives, taught in nontraditional settings in the U.S. and overseas, developed curricula and educational materials, and designed and facilitated professional development for classroom and community educators. Currently operating Educational Consulting Group, Israel is involved with diverse projects, including strategic planning and product development.

This lesson has been reviewed by the Center for Civic Education ([www.civiced.org](http://www.civiced.org)).