Recognizing Bias in Primary Sources

LEARN THE SKILL
To analyze primary sources effectively, historians must learn to recognize bias in primary sources. A bias is a preference or inclination that prevents a person from making an impartial judgment. A person’s bias can be influenced by political, social, cultural, or personal beliefs. Most primary sources reflect some type of bias, either from the person who created the source or the person who views the source. Bias can give clues about an author’s background or intent. For example, the author may be trying to justify an action or change an opinion.

Even though bias may sometimes be unintentional, sources always reflect the point of view and background of the people who created them. To avoid bias and gain a balanced view of past events, a historian must look at many sources on the same incident or issue.

Follow the steps below to learn how to recognize bias.

1. Identify the speaker or author. The author’s background and relationship with the event or topic being discussed may have influenced what he or she wrote.

2. Examine the author’s point of view. What beliefs is the author trying to convey to his or her audience?

3. Compare the source with other documents and known facts about the same event. Use a variety of sources to develop your own conclusions regarding this event or time period.

DIRECTIONS Read the following document written by Chinese official Lin Biao in 1965.

Since World War II, U.S. imperialism has stepped into the shoes of German, Japanese and Italian fascism and has been trying to build a great American empire by dominating and enslaving the whole world. It is actively fostering Japanese and West German militarism as its chief accomplices in unleashing a world war. Like a vicious wolf, it is bullying and enslaving various peoples, plundering their wealth, encroaching upon their countries’ sovereignty and interfering in their internal affairs. It is the most rabid aggressor in human history and the most ferocious common enemy of the people of the world. Every people or country in the world that wants revolution, independence and peace cannot but direct the spearhead of its struggle against U.S. imperialism …

   Everything is divisible. And so is this colossus of U.S. imperialism. It can be split up and defeated. The
peoples of Asia, Africa, Latin America and other
regions can destroy it piece by piece, some striking at
its head and others at its feet. That is why the greatest
fear of U.S. imperialism is that people’s wars will be
launched in different parts of the world, and
particularly in Asia, Africa and Latin America, and
why it regards people’s war as a mortal danger.
U.S. imperialism relies solely on its nuclear
weapons to intimidate people. But these weapons
cannot save U.S. imperialism from its doom.

From *Long Live the Victory of the People’s War* by Lin Piao.
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**PRACTICE THE SKILL**

Answer the following questions about the document written by Lin Biao.

1. What is the subject of this passage?

2. What are Lin’s feelings about the United States? How can you tell?

3. What possible bias might be present in this passage?

**APPLY THE SKILL**

Use your understanding of how to recognize bias in primary sources to
answer the question that follows. Write your response in a complete
paragraph on a separate sheet of paper.

4. How could analyzing this document help historians gain a better understanding of the
relationship between China and the United States during the mid-1960s?