

3.2F. King John and the Magna Carta

What do you see in this picture? Who is King John? Who are the people surrounding the King? What do you think they are saying to him? How do you think King John is feeling? How do you think King John and the people with him feel about each other? Why?

- ❑ **In this slide** we see King John of England being forced to sign the Magna Carta in the year A.D. 1215.
- The medieval period during which the power of the English king became more limited was followed by a time when the monarch gained more power once again. The nobles understandably became upset because they had been used to having some control over the monarchy. Their anger was intensified when the actions of King Richard began to cost the people a lot of money in taxes. Richard had used large sums of tax money to participate in a foreign crusade called for by the Catholic Church. During his return trip to England, Richard was kidnapped and held for ransom. As a result, the English people were forced to pay more money to free their king. After Richard's eventual death in battle, his younger brother John assumed the throne in 1199.
- John "Lackland" was a cruel and unpopular king. King John had inherited no land from his father and upon ascending the throne, he lacked the funds to defend England's lands in France successfully. As a result, he forced all landowners to pay him more money. John also began to buy goods cheaply and sell them to his subjects at high prices. Subjects were ordered to assist in the construction of John's palaces and to donate horses and other needed items whenever John requested them. At the same time, John offered fewer services to the people. Finally, John demanded more money in order to go to war with France. John was a weak military leader (earning the nickname "Softsword") and lost much of England's land in France. By this time, the English nobility was furious with their king. Because John had also engaged in a bitter quarrel with Pope Innocent III and tried to take control over some Church decisions, he was excommunicated by the Pope. Consequently, church officials in England also became angry with the king and supported the nobles in their opposition to the king's policies.
- Finally, in 1215, at the meadow of Runnymede, the nobles and church officials confronted John and forced him to sign a contract listing their demands. This contract, called the Magna Carta (Great Charter), curbed the king's power and became the basis for many democratic propositions in the centuries to come. The Magna Carta contained several rules for kings: the king was not allowed to imprison freemen without a trial by jury; the king had to consult with the lords before taxing land; the king had to choose competent officials who understood and obeyed the law themselves; and the king could not interfere with or limit the freedom of the church.

- After King John signed the charter, the conflicts continued until his death the following year. The Magna Carta lived on, and though it did not directly challenge the sovereignty of the king, it was an important step in eventually giving more power to the people and limiting the power of kings.

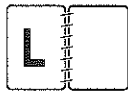


Ask a group of students to come forward and stand in front of the slide. One student should take on the role of King John and the others should assume the roles of the nobles and clergymen surrounding the king. Ask students to act out a scenario that explains why this meeting is taking place, what the nobles' demands are, and what King John's feelings are about signing the document. Prompt them to answer the following questions:

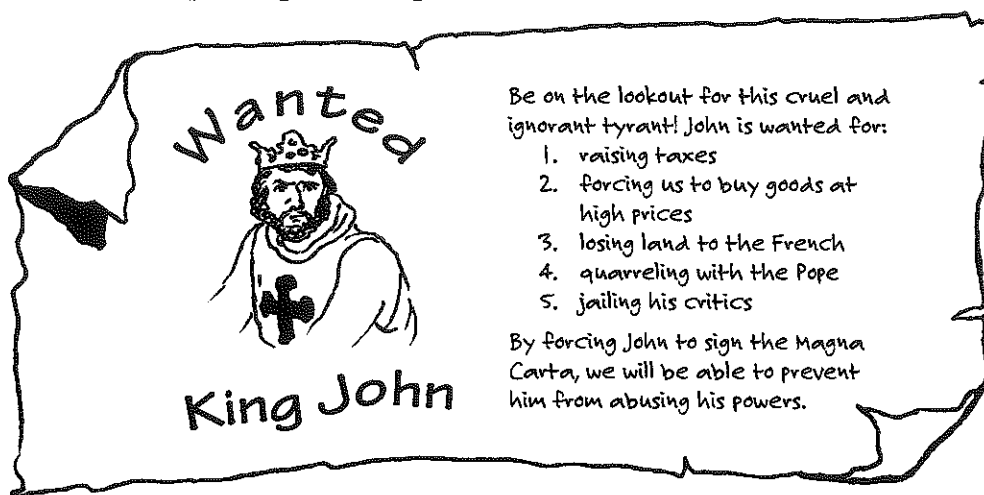
Ask the nobles: **How are you feeling right now? How do you feel about King John? What has he done to make you feel this way? What do you want him to do? What do you think you will do if he doesn't sign the Magna Carta?**

Ask the clergy: **How do you feel about King John? What has he done to make you feel this way? Do you think he should sign the Magna Carta? Explain.**

Ask King John: **What is that attached to your belt? How are you feeling right now? Why are you here? What do you think will happen if you don't sign the Magna Carta? In the future do you intend to do as the Magna Carta demands?**



Idea for Student Response: On the left side of their notebooks, have students design a "Wanted" poster for King John. The poster should list grievances the English have against John and the benefit of forcing him to sign the Magna Carta. A completed poster might look like this:



Slide 3.2F: King John and the Magna Carta

King John, you have angered us by:

King John's Thoughts

King John's Personality

