PRIMARY SOURCE ANALYSIS
"JOIN, OR DIE" CARTOON

Examine the political cartoon below. Then answer the questions.

1. Describe the cartoon. What do you see?

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2. What is your reaction to this cartoon? How does it make you feel?

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Read some background information about the cartoon. Then answer the questions on the next page.

How did an image of a snake help unite the colonies?

The "Join, or Die" cartoon appeared in the May 9, 1754, edition of Benjamin Franklin's Pennsylvania Gazette. The cartoon was beside an editorial Franklin wrote encouraging the British colonies to unite against the French-aligned forces in the French and Indian War (1754–1763). The French had recently captured a British fort in the Ohio Valley and felt confident that the "present disunited state of the British Colonies" would allow them to capture the western frontier.

The abbreviated letters in the image refer to South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania (includes Delaware), New Jersey, New York, and New England (New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island).

The "Join, or Die" woodcut became a widely-accepted symbol of the need for colonial unity. The image originally inspired the American colonies to come together as a unit to help the British defeat French forces during the French and Indian War.

A decade later, the image inspired those same American colonists to fight against the British in the American Revolutionary War (1775–1787).

As you examine "Join, or Die," consider the following details associated with the image:

- Snakes are mysterious and often frightening creatures. They are also well-known symbols of renewal and regeneration because they shed their skin to reinvent themselves.

- A popular legend claimed that putting the severed parts of a snake together would bring it back to life.

- Before 1754, the American colonies were not united. Identifying individual colonies with the pieces of a cut-up snake made the image an effective metaphor for the American colonies needing to formally unite.

- The text, "Join, or Die," provides a brief and clear directive to the colonial audience.

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Answer the following questions about the "Join, or Die" cartoon.

5. Why did Franklin choose a severed snake to represent the British colonies in America?

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3. What does N.E. stand for in the political cartoon? Why do you think it's the label for the head of the snake?

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6. What reaction might a British member of Parliament have to Franklin's suggestion that colonies in the Americas should become more united?

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4. Why is Benjamin Franklin insisting that the colonies must "Join, or Die" in 1754? What is happening, and why is joining together important?

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7. How did the mission associated with the "Join, or Die" message change over time?

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