

# SECTION THREE: GRADES TEN THROUGH TWELVE

Studying the American presidency offers students an opportunity to explore the democratic political process and to expand their understanding of how this process has shaped the nation's history and continues to influence their own lives. What does it mean to be the president of the United States of America? What is the relationship of the presidency to the American people? The activities included in this section, many of which are based on primary sources, are designed to supplement your American history curriculum and to challenge students to tackle sophisticated questions and issues. The activities are adaptable for various learning styles and levels and correspond to *National Standards for History*. The content in this section relates directly to the curriculum requirements of grades 10 through 12. The topics chosen are based on *The American Presidency: A Glorious Burden*, an exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History.

## TOPICS

- I. **Campaigns and Elections: From the Front Porch to Your T.V.**  
 Presidents Addressed: Washington, Jackson, W. H. Harrison, McKinley, F. Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, Nixon, Reagan, Clinton  
 Time Periods Covered: 1797-1992
- II. **Roles and Responsibilities: One Day in the Life of a President**  
 Presidents Addressed: Truman  
 Time Periods Covered: 1950
- III. **Limits of Power: Analyzing Political Cartoons**  
 Presidents Addressed: A. Johnson, F. Roosevelt, Nixon, Clinton  
 Time Periods Covered: 1868-1998
- IV. **Assassination and Mourning: Recording Oral Histories**  
 Presidents Addressed: Lincoln, Garfield, McKinley, F. Roosevelt, Truman, Kennedy, Ford, Reagan  
 Time Periods Covered: 1863-1981
- V. **Communicating the Presidency: The Media and Public Opinion**  
 Presidents Addressed: F. Roosevelt, Kennedy, Nixon, Reagan  
 Time Periods Covered: 1933-present day

### I. Campaigns and Elections: From the Front Porch to Your T.V.

**Objectives:** Students will be able to describe how presidential campaigns and elections have become transformed. Students will trace the history of voting rights.

**Skills:** Primary source analysis, research, chronological relationships analysis, analytical writing.

**Time:** 1 to 3 class periods, plus additional time for homework, depending on the number of activities chosen.

**Standards:** National Standards in Historical Thinking 1 (Chronological Thinking), 2 (Historical Comprehension), 3 (Historical Analysis), 4 (Historical Research), Eras 4, 7, and 9 (1797-1992).

### Teacher Background

For all the cynicism about politics, Americans have a deep pride in the democratic process. During the 1800s, Americans transformed presidential elections from the concerns of a limited elite into a massive expression of popular will.

Presidential elections are more than just contests to select officeholders. They are occasions when Americans can engage in a national dialogue. They offer an opportunity to examine the state of the country and to express concerns on issues often ignored by the news media and political institutions.

The Constitution did not specify who had the right to vote in elections, leaving that decision to the states. At first, most states allowed only propertied white males to vote; by the 1820s many property requirements were dropped. Only after the Civil War did the federal government enact laws specifying certain national standards. Slowly suffrage was extended, generally applying today to citizens eighteen and older. But this did not happen without the dedicated struggle of those demanding inclusion. Controversy and discrimination characterized the history of voting, as minorities, women, the poor, and young adults fought to obtain this basic right of citizenship.

## Student Activities

- 1. Campaigning:** In the beginning of this nation's political life, the idea that "the office should seek the man rather than the man seek the office" governed the campaign process. During the 1800s, however, presidential campaigns began to change. Have students select three different eras and compare the method of campaigning in each. Then, as a class, discuss the positive and the negative effects of the changes in the campaign process throughout American history. Following are some campaigns to choose from: (a) Americans write letters to encourage Washington to accept the presidency; (b) Jackson supporters put up hickory poles across the country and sponsor local picnics, parades, and barbecues; (c) the Whig Party's "log cabin" campaign for William Henry Harrison focuses on staged events, campaign advertising, and souvenirs; (d) McKinley holds a "front porch" campaign while campaign manager Mark Hanna helps to run the election; (e) "The Roosevelt Special" carries Franklin D. Roosevelt from the East to the West coasts and back again while he makes more than fifty speeches; (f) Truman makes three hundred speeches to six million people during his 30,000-mile "whistle stop" train campaign; (g) Kennedy and Nixon hold the first televised presidential debate, and over 100 million people tune in; (h) Reagan looks into the camera during the televised debate and asks, "Are you better off than you were four years ago?"; (i) Clinton becomes the first presidential candidate to appear on the popular-culture television channel MTV.



**Sigamos La Causa! poster**

*Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, Political History Collections*

**2. Voting Rights:** Divide your class into four topic groups: white males without property, women, African Americans, and young adults. Have your students research the history of their assigned population's struggle to gain the vote. Each group should create a leaflet that includes the group's slogan, mission statement, and top three arguments for the right to vote. At the bottom of the leaflet, students should include the date of enfranchisement and specific examples of the effect that this population has had on presidential elections. Students meet with members of the other three groups, hand out their flyers, and debate their platforms.

**Extended Activity:** Although virtually every group in the United States has demanded the right to vote, many Americans who have this right do not exercise it. In recent presidential elections, less than 50 percent of the voting-age population went to the polls. Have your students analyze the visual and verbal messages in the poster shown on the previous page. (For a larger version of the poster, see the inside front cover of this manual.) Then, using what they have learned about the voting history of one of the groups they did not research in Activity 2: Voting Rights, students can create a poster to encourage members of this population to vote.

## II. Roles and Responsibilities: One Day in the Life of a President

**Objectives:** Students will be able to describe the diverse and demanding roles that the president of the United States must fulfill and will be able to identify presidents who have been particularly successful in each of these capacities.

**Skills:** Research, analysis and evaluation of a primary source.

**Time:** 1 to 3 class periods, plus additional time for homework, depending on number of activities chosen.

**Standards:** National Standards in Historical Thinking 1 (Chronological Thinking), 2 (Historical Comprehension), 3 (Historical Analysis), 4 (Historical Research), Era 9 (1950).

### Teacher Background

As a nation, we place no greater responsibility on any one individual than we do on the president. Could any job be more demanding and complex? The president must serve as Commander in Chief, Chief Executive, Chief Diplomat, Ceremonial Head of State, National Leader, Manager of the Economy, and Party Leader. On any given day he might have to make life-and-death decisions, propose policies that will change the course of the country, and then greet a group of elementary school children. The greatest presidents thrived at balancing the numerous roles they are expected to play; others stumbled because they could not master some of the many duties of the office.

The featured document in this section is an entry from the presidential daily agenda for Harry S. Truman for Thursday, June 29, 1950. The activities recorded on this one day provide a glimpse into the diverse roles and responsibilities of the office of the presidency. Although the document reveals information about the individuals and groups with whom President Truman conferred, it provides only a clue to the larger story of this day in history. Just two days previously, on June 27, 1950, President Truman had ordered limited military assistance to South Korea and appealed to the United Nations to intervene. The following day, June 30, 1950, the United States ordered American ground forces into Korea and President Truman appointed General Douglas MacArthur to command the UN operations there. Consequently, in this sample page, off-the-record meetings are noted as well as conferences with several cabinet members and other high-ranking officials.

Thursday, June 29th:

9.55 am (Mr. Walter Gates)  
(Came to see Mr. Connelly and saw the President OFF THE RECORD)

10.00 am (Staff Meeting)

11.00 am Honorable Frederick Lawton, Director, Bureau of the Budget  
(One-half hour)

11.30 am Honorable Charles F. Brannan, Secretary of Agriculture  
(Called Mr. Connelly to ask for this)

11.45 am (Vice Admiral E. B. Cochrane, Head of M. I. T.)  
(Arranged by Admiral Dennison, who brought Admiral Cochrane  
in OFF THE RECORD)

12.00 Honorable Edward R. Dudley, American Ambassador to Liberia  
(In State Department on consultation and asked if he might  
call before returning to his post at Monrovia)

12.10 pm (George Biddle)  
(Mr. Donald Dawson) - OFF THE RECORD

12.15 pm The President received group of Overseas Employees of the State  
Department, engaged in work on The International Information  
and Educational Exchange Program.  
(This group represents thirty-two overseas posts; are nationals  
of other countries who are now in U. S. for two months orienta-  
tion and training. These foreign employees of the United States  
Government were chosen from overseas posts for ability and  
devotion to the United States International Information and  
Educational Exchange Program. The State Department asked  
that the President receive them.) - LIST ATTACHED.

12.30 pm The Secretary of State - Honorable Dean Acheson  
(Usual Thursday appointment )

1.00 pm (LUNCH)

4.00 pm Press and Radio Conference

5.00 pm The following conferred with the President:  
Honorable Dean Acheson - Secretary of State (and advisors)  
Honorable Louis Johnson - Secretary of Defense  
Honorable Thomas K. Finletter - Secretary of Air Force  
Honorable Frank Pace, Jr. - Secretary of Army  
Honorable Francis P. Matthews - Secretary of Navy  
Honorable Stephen T. Early - Under Secretary of Defense  
General Omar N. Bradley - Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff  
General Hoyt S. Vandenberg  
General J. Lawton Collins  
Admiral Forrest P. Sherman  
Honorable James Lay  
Honorable George Elsey  
Honorable John Foster Dulles

7.00 pm (The President left for Statler Hotel, where he attended dinner  
of Finance Committee of Democratic National Committee)

**Presidential Daily Agenda for Harry S. Truman, Thursday, June 29, 1950**  
*Courtesy of the Harry S Truman Library*

## Student Activities

**1. Truman Agenda Analysis:** Distribute copies of the document to each student. Have students analyze the document. The following questions are suggested for student analysis:

### Student Document Analysis Questions

- What are your first impressions as you explore the document?
  - What kind of document is it?
  - Read through the document carefully. Make a list of unusual words or phrases.
  - Is there a date or some other indication of when it was written?
  - Who wrote or created the document?
  - For whom was the document created?
  - How does this one document inform your understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the president of the United States? Make a list of the roles to which this document refers.
  - What does this document imply without stating?
  - What questions do you have about the document?
  - How can your questions be answered?
  - Was there anything surprising to you about the document?
- **Discussion:** Discuss student findings and generate a list of the seven presidential roles. Discuss student reactions to the document, particularly any unanswered questions they may have about it. Have students generate a list of qualities they believe are necessary for success in this job.

**2. Presidential Roles Research:** Students choose one of the seven presidential roles mentioned in the above text (and outlined on page 12 of this manual) and conduct research to determine which president they think has best fulfilled that role. For example, who has been the country's greatest commander in chief or its best chief executive? Students must support their choice with evidence, citing a minimum of two primary sources. Students should select five examples of specific events or circumstances to support their choice and prepare an oral presentation. Students make presentations to the class, and if more than one president is presented per role, classmates take a vote based on their fellow students' research and power of persuasion.

## III. Limits of Power: Analyzing Political Cartoons

**Objectives:** Students will be able to describe the constitutional limits placed on the executive branch and will be able to analyze and create political cartoons.

**Skills:** Primary document analysis, evaluating historical perspective and bias, analytical writing.

**Time:** 30 minutes to 3 class periods, plus additional time for homework, depending on the number of activities chosen.

**Standards:** National Standards in Historical Thinking 1 (Chronological Thinking), 2 (Historical Comprehension), 3 (Historical Analysis), 4 (Historical Research), Eras 5, 8, and 10 (1868-1998).

## Teacher Background

Presidential, or executive, power is not fixed and is limited by constitutional and political constraints. The Constitution prescribes a system of checks and balances whereby the powers of the federal government are shared among the executive, judicial, and legislative branches. In this delicate balance, however, the influences of the three branches continually shift. They are determined by the individuals in various offices and their ability to affect public opinion, and by the political, economic, and social climate of the day.

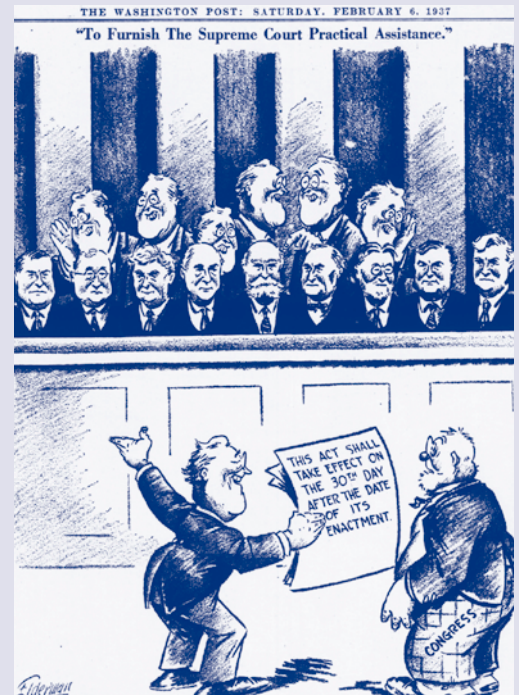
The ultimate limit on presidential power is removal from office by Congress through the impeachment process. Only three presidents in American history have seriously faced removal. The House of Representatives impeached Andrew Johnson in 1868 and William Clinton in 1998. In both cases the Senate voted to acquit. Richard Nixon, on the verge of being impeached, resigned from office in 1972.

## Student Activities

- Cartoon Analysis:** Distribute copies of the cartoon below to each student. (For a larger version of the cartoon, see the inside back cover of this manual.) Have students analyze the cartoon. The following questions are suggested for student analysis:

## Student Cartoon Analysis Questions

- What are your first impressions as you explore this cartoon?
- What objects or people appear in the cartoon? Create a list.
- Which of the objects on your list are symbols?
- What do you think each symbol means?
- Is there an action taking place in the cartoon? Describe it.
- Does the cartoon have a title or a caption? Record it.
- Are there any other words or phrases within the cartoon? List them.
- Do any important dates or numbers appear in the cartoon? List them.
- Who created the cartoon?
- Is there a date or some other indication of when it was created?
- For what audience was the cartoon created?
- What is the message of this cartoon?
- How does this cartoon discuss the limits of presidential power?
- Who would agree or disagree with the cartoon's message? Why?
- What questions do you have about the document?



FDR "Packing the Court" cartoon  
Elderman Copyright 1937, The Washington Post  
Reprinted with permission

- **Discussion:** Discuss student responses and have the class determine the message of this cartoon. Discuss unanswered questions that students might have about the cartoon. Have students generate a list of constitutional and political limits placed on the president's power.

**Extended Activity:** Have students read Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Fireside Chat on the Reorganization of the Judiciary," March 9, 1937. (This document can be found on the web at [www.hpol.org/fdr/chat](http://www.hpol.org/fdr/chat).) Have students create a cartoon that expresses a different perspective on this issue than the cartoon printed here. Students' cartoons should contain each of the elements identified in this cartoon.

- Impeachment Cartoons:** Have students choose and analyze a political cartoon about the Andrew Johnson, Richard Nixon, or William Clinton impeachments. (See the Resources section for web sites and books. Students also may search for cartoons in newspapers and magazines from the time of the impeachments.) Students can write articles for a contemporary magazine that explain the key constitutional and political issues, as well as the viewpoint, portrayed in their cartoons.

## IV. Assassination and Mourning: Recording Oral Histories

**Objectives:** Students will be able to explain how public events have a significant impact on private individuals and will learn to gather and analyze information through oral history interviews.

**Skills:** Research, evaluation of oral histories and other historical information, interviewing, oral presentation, critical thinking.

**Time:** 1 class period for the oral history workshop, 2 weeks for independent student research and interview preparation, 2 to 3 class periods for presentations.

**Standards:** National Standards in Historical Thinking 3 (Historical Analysis), 4 (Historical Research), Eras 8-10 (1945-1981).

### Teacher Background

The death of a president, especially by assassination, traumatizes the nation and plunges it into a period of questioning, reflection, and ritualized mourning. Beginning with an attack on Andrew Jackson in 1835, there have been eleven attempts to kill the American president. Four presidents—Abraham Lincoln, James Garfield, William McKinley, and John F. Kennedy—died from assassins' bullets. Four presidents, including Franklin D. Roosevelt, have also died in office, devastating the nation. Public expressions of grief over the death of presidents in office often demonstrate a strong, personal connection between the president and millions of Americans. Many people alive today remember these events clearly. Listening to the stories of these individuals helps us piece together the past and better understand our history.

### Student Activities

- 1. Oral Histories:** Have your students conduct oral histories with four people who remember the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the attempted assassinations of Truman, Ford, or Reagan, or the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt. It would be ideal to have students interview individuals who had possible different perspectives—a high school student, a veteran, a homemaker, a public official in your community—at the time of the event. (Before your students begin this activity, you may want to lead an oral history workshop. Refer to the oral history web sites listed in the Resources section.)
  - **Preparation:** Students research the event by reading newspaper and magazine articles from the week in history during which it occurred. The interviews will be most successful if students have a clear sense of what happened and why, and if they have prepared questions as a guide.
  - **Interview:** Students may use an audiotape or videotape recorder to document the interview. During the interviews, students should be active listeners, saving follow-up questions for the end of the interviews to clarify and extend the interviewees' statements.
  - **Analysis:** Students select two 3- to 5-minute segments from the interviews they conducted to present to the class. Students transcribe the segments to hand out to the class. Their selections should help students answer the following questions: Do you think oral history is a useful tool in understanding the past? Why or why not? What are oral history's limitations? What are its strengths?

## V. Communicating the Presidency: The Media and Public Opinion

**Objectives:** Students will understand the increasingly important role that the media have played in disseminating the president's ideas and image and will be able to explain how the character of media coverage shapes public opinion.

**Skills:** Reading comprehension, primary document analysis, analytical writing.

**Time:** 3 class periods, plus additional time for homework, depending on the number of activities chosen.

**Standards:** National Standards in Historical Thinking 2 (Historical Comprehension), 3 (Historical Analysis), 4 (Historical Research), Eras 8-10 (1933-present).

### Teacher Background

The ability to communicate effectively to the American public is one characteristic of a successful presidency. Mastering the media of the period, whether newspapers, newsreels, radio, television, or even the Internet, is crucial to a president's capacity to excite people and to convey the hopes and aspirations of his administration. The media have always played an important role in shaping the president's public image, but they have become increasingly influential over the past century.

The president used newspapers as the dominant means of mass communication in the early 1900s to convey his message and maintain support for the party's issues and leadership. By the 1930s, when some 85 million Americans attended movie theaters each week, motion picture newsreels became an important means of mass communication. This development gave Americans their first look at the "performance" of presidential speeches and addresses that would become increasingly familiar through radio and television in the coming years.

At the same time, radios were turning into central fixtures in most American households and were becoming the foremost medium of mass communication. By 1924, 1.25 million American households had a radio, compared with 400,000 the previous year. While Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover occasionally were heard on the radio, Franklin Roosevelt, a master of timing and tone, was the first president to effectively use the medium with his popular "fireside chats." Through radio, Roosevelt directly reached the American public as never before possible.

Television quickly eclipsed radio as the most important factor in shaping the president's public image. One of the first events to prove the power of television was the televised debate between presidential candidates John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon. Many believe that Kennedy would not have won the election without the help of television. These debates ushered in a new kind of political strategy that recognized television's power to sway public opinion. In later years, Ronald Reagan's ease with television earned him the nickname "the Great Communicator."



**Nixon-Kennedy debate chairs**

*Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History, Political History Collections*

## Student Activities

- 1. Debate in Three Media:** Students read, listen to, and watch the first Nixon-Kennedy debate, September 26, 1960. (See the Resources section for web sites that provide the transcript, as well as audio and video recordings of the debate.) Divide the class into three groups and have each group analyze the debate in one of the three media. Have students create charts of the issues discussed and the candidates' positions, placing a star next to the candidate who they think expressed the most convincing argument. Students should chart their reactions as well. For instance, as they are listening, students should describe the candidates' voices, and speech patterns, and their reactions to hearing them. As they watch the debate, students should describe each candidate's physical appearance, gestures, and presence and their reactions to seeing them. Each group votes to decide who they think "won" the debate.
  - **Discussion:** After each group presents who "won" the debate and why, lead a discussion with the class around the following question: Which is more important—the message or the medium? Students should use specific examples from the Nixon-Kennedy debate and from their own experiences.
- 2. Great Communicators:** Despite their vastly different political beliefs and programs, both Franklin D. Roosevelt and Reagan have been considered great communicators, not only because they each mastered powerful media, the radio and the television respectively, but because they both had a remarkable ability to speak to and reach the public. Have students compare and contrast their first inaugural addresses. (See the Resources section for web sites that provide transcripts of presidential inaugural speeches.) Students should analyze the content, structure, tone, word choice, and other presentation techniques of each speech. Students should address the following questions: How does each speech express the newly elected president's vision of the presidency? How does each speech express the president's vision of his relationship to the American people?
- 3. Print Media Bias:** Have students read and photocopy at least two articles about the president in *The New York Times* or another national daily newspaper every day for a week. Students also may go back in time to read about a past president or a past event involving a president on microfilm. Have students use examples from three of the articles they collected throughout the week to write a "Letter to the Editor," expressing their concerns about media bias. Students should address the following questions: How is the newspaper attempting to shape the public's perception of the president? What is the article saying or implying about the president? What words in the article provide clues to the writer's viewpoint and argument? Are certain facts or viewpoints missing from the article? Students may want to do additional research on the topic(s) presented in the newspaper articles to help them answer these questions.