

THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Classroom: Grades 9-12

Presidential Transitions: "The Torch is Passed"

Activity - As if it Were Yesterday: Oral History Interviews

Part I: The Assassination of President John F. Kennedy

One way you learn about historical events is to talk to the people who experienced them. Many people remember vividly the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963. Personal memories provide a perspective that is different from the accounts you read in textbooks; it helps you understand the impact of an event on ordinary people. At the time you study the transition of Lyndon Johnson to the presidency after the death of John F. Kennedy, arrange to interview a person who remembers it personally.

Getting Ready

Before you set up a time and date, give thought to what you hope to find out in the interview. Here are some sample questions that might help you prepare:

- How did they hear that President Kennedy had died? Where were they, and what was their first reaction?
- At any time did they fear for the life of President Lyndon Johnson? Did they believe there was a plot that might include the assassination of other government officials?
- What did they make of Jack Ruby shooting Lee Harvey Oswald? Did they see Oswald shot on "live" TV? How did that affect them? Did that event make them feel more or less inclined to see the assassination of Kennedy as a plot?
- In what ways did they grieve for this national loss? Did they cancel appointments? Gather with friends? Attend a memorial service? Watch the coverage on TV?
- Did they watch the funeral on TV? Were the ceremonial aspects of the funeral, as shown through televised coverage, comforting to them?
- Did they have any fear that the government would not continue as it always had?

- What were their feelings generally about President Kennedy as compared to Lyndon Johnson?
- To what degree do they believe their political views shaped their reaction to this event?
- Now that a lot of time has passed, do they view the event differently? Why or why not?

Making Arrangements

- When you contact the person to be interviewed, be sure you describe the purpose of the visit, explain how the information will be used, and estimate the length of the interview.
- Before you make this initial contact, determine if you will take notes, tape-record, or videotape the session. Let the interviewee know what method you will use, and be sure it is acceptable to him or her. If you plan to use electronic devices, check to see if they work! The quality of sound or image you need will depend on how the taped material will be used. If it is for a "living history" archive, the quality should be very good. If you're going to use the recording primarily as a resource for note-taking, you just need to be able to hear it during playback.
- Arrange the time and place, making sure it will be in a quiet setting with no distractions.

During the Interview

- If your interview is to be taped or videotaped, do a sound and image check before you start the question-answer session, even if you did so before you left home.
- Rather than plunge right in to your list of questions, take some time to find some common ground with the interviewee. Start your questions after you can see that the person feels comfortable and has had time to relax.
- If the interviewee tends to give very brief answers, think of some follow-up questions to draw him or her out. [Examples: Were you at school or work when it happened? Were you living in this area at the time? Do you remember the name of the person who told you the news?]
- Be reassuring if the person doesn't remember the answer to one of your questions.

- Make eye contact and smile.

Activity Ideas

1. Your teacher probably will not have time for all in the class to share their individual interviews. To get the benefit of another person's interview, share what you learned with a student partner. Exchange interview materials—a tape recording, videotape or follow-up log. After each of you processes the information, write your partner a letter explaining similarities and differences between the two interviews. Read your responses aloud to the class. After the class has completed the sharing, write a short reaction paper, noting "patterns of memory" that seem evident from this exercise.
2. Use the information you gathered in your interview to write a set of three or four diary entries featuring your interviewee. In choosing what parts of the interview to include, remember your purpose: to enrich the understanding of your classmates about this event beyond what they can get from a textbook.

Perhaps your teacher will compile the diary entries into an ongoing "You Are There" notebook that class members can share.

3. Write a script for a short TV special reviewing the events of November 22-25, 1963: the assassination of John Kennedy; the swearing in of Lyndon Johnson; the arrest of Lee Harvey Oswald and his subsequent death at the hands of Jack Ruby; and the funeral of the slain president. Use the information gathered from the Student Text and your own textbook, then intersperse portions of the personal interviews to build an authentic script. Think about the tone of such a special, and how the commentators on the day of Kennedy's funeral might have used the media as a means of allaying fears about the outcome of this national horror. Choose classmates to play the roles of commentators reporting from key scenes described in the script. Ask others in your class to play the roles of some of the interviewees, working them into the "man on the street" segments of your presentation. Videotape the final effort, so the whole class can watch it as a television production.
4. Perhaps your teacher will consider beginning a "living history" archive for your class. By recording personal memories of those who lived through significant events of modern history, classmates can enrich their learning. From a collection of personal interviews, perhaps your teacher can select those that are most interesting and technically well done to build an ongoing bank, using portions of them for specific lessons not only this year but next.

For Discussion: After you participate in any of these activities, share with your classmates any new insights you gained using this interview method. How does interview data compare to information you found in more traditional sources? How reliable are these sources compared to your textbook or other secondary sources? What do the interviews add to your understanding of how important an orderly transfer of presidential power is in a democratic society?

Part II: President Jimmy Carter and the Iranian Hostage Crisis

Most Americans would agree that one major factor in Jimmy Carter's loss of a re-election bid in 1980 had to do with his handling of the Iranian hostage crisis. Your Student Text recounts the final days of Carter's presidency as he tried as a last measure of his administration to secure the release of the hostages. Ronald Reagan had already given his inaugural address when word came that, finally, the hostages had been released. The new president invited Carter to go to Weisbaden, West Germany, where the hostages were resting and preparing for their return to the United States, and welcome them. The former president had fervently hoped that he would be able to make this trip before the end of his term, but it wasn't possible. Now, at last, he could greet these freed hostages who had been held during 444 long days of his presidency. Yet Hamilton Jordan, Carter's chief of staff, explains in *Crisis* that, when the president arrived, Sheldon Krys, the State Department official who had been responsible throughout the crisis for liaison with the hostages, gave him a warning:

Mr. President, there is a good bit of hostility among the group toward you. One of the former hostages has even refused to attend this meeting. These people have basically been told over and over, "The U.S. doesn't care about you, and Carter doesn't care about you, and nothing has been done to win your release." They have almost no sense of what we did to get them out and no sense of the feeling of the American people toward them.⁴

When Carter did see the former hostages, he gave them an opportunity to ask questions, after first telling them, "I take full responsibility for the decisions made by my government." Jordan explained that "the first man stepped forward in a trembling angry voice and said, 'Mr. President, why did you let the Shah into the states when the embassy advised against it?'" President Carter offered his rationale. Then, another man stepped forward and said, "Why did you attempt the rescue mission?" Again, Carter explained.⁵

Using the interview procedure ideas in Part I of this activity, arrange to interview at least two Americans who are old enough to remember the Iranian hostage crisis, preferably of different backgrounds and ages. To establish a context for their responses, ask them to answer some general questions:

What do they remember about the crisis and how long it lasted?

Do they have a strong memory of the Ayatollah Khomeini?

Can they remember this crisis shaping their opinion of the president?

Do they remember how their friends, or other members of their family, felt about the hostage crisis?

Do they remember seeing the signs in windows or on TV counting how many days had passed since the hostages were taken: ["This is the 258th day of the Iranian hostage crisis."]? If so, what was their reaction to such gestures?

After you have established the background, ask them the two questions posed by the hostages:

The president permitted the shah of Iran to come to this country for medical treatment.

1. Why do you think he did that?
2. Did you agree or disagree with that decision?

The president approved a paramilitary rescue attempt of the hostages, called Desert One, that was not successful. Eight American servicemen died in that aborted mission.

3. How did you feel about the president's decision to do this?
4. Why do you think it failed?

End the interview by asking these questions:

President Carter's methods for negotiating the release of the hostages has been criticized.

5. What do you think he could have done differently?
6. What was your feeling about Jimmy Carter at the time he left office 1981, and in what ways has your opinion changed over time?

After other class members have finished their interviews, work in groups of five or six to compile the results into an Opinion Grid. Using a large piece of butcher paper, write the last six questions of the interview across the top of the paper, and make a grid to hold five answers for each question underneath. Paraphrase each interviewee's responses onto the sheet for all six questions. Look over the grid, and mark through duplicate answers. To further cull the interview responses, repeat this process with other groups in the classroom. When all of the opinions of the interviewees have been culled, analyze the results and make some generalizations. Would this group of interviewees have been

among those who gave Carter only a 20 percent approval rating in 1980, or were the results different? Did the interviewees' responses to the last question reflect a change in their opinion about Carter? If so, why do you think they changed their mind?

As a follow-up, read from either Hamilton Jordan's *Crisis*, or President Carter's *Keeping Faith*, Carter's rationales for deciding to admit the shah and approving a military rescue of the hostages. Share this information with the classmates, and ask them if Carter's steps seemed reasonable. How do they think the hostages would have viewed Carter's efforts to rescue them?