

THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

Classroom: Grades 9-12

Presidential Transitions: "The Torch is Passed"

Activity - Another Time, Another Place: Orderly Transfer of Power after Assassination

Four American presidents have died at the hands of assassins, three in a thirty-six year span of time: Abraham Lincoln in 1865; James A. Garfield in 1881; William McKinley in 1901. Then, of course, President Kennedy was murdered in 1963. Working in teams of four, assign an assassinated president to each team member, then conduct research to determine the circumstances surrounding the assassinations. So each of you will gather similar information, consider working from a list of questions such as: What were the circumstances of the president's death?

Who was the assassin, and what apparently motivated him to kill the president? (Was he disgruntled with the government? Insane? Was it part of a plot?)

How long did the president live after being wounded? How did this affect plans for a transition?

How long had the president served when he was assassinated?

Was he considered a popular president at the time he died? Was the country in a relatively stable or difficult period? Explain, using specific examples.

Through what means of communication did most of the people hear about the death of the president? (Newspapers? Telegraph? Telephone? TV?)

In what ways did the nation mourn the loss of their leader? What special ceremonies or rituals were held?

How closely did the vice president attempt to carry out the policies and programs of the slain president? Was he successful? Provide clear examples.

Did the vice president who thus became president eventually win the position in his own right?

After all four of you have gathered the information, develop a skit using this scenario:

Each of you is a newspaper journalist. In your time, you were considered the best. Through the miracle of "time travel" you have a chance to visit the White House Press

Room and meet with the current president's press secretary. Talk soon centers on your past careers as journalists in another time, another place. Very quickly four of you discover you have something in common: you covered the story of a president's assassination.

Keeping the factual information in mind, develop a loosely organized dialogue comparing and contrasting these four presidential transitions. (The effect should be conversational-an insider's banter-but should include plenty of information.) Since each of you was a journalist of high prestige in your time and you are now speaking with the best from another time, you will want to weave your story in the most compelling way!

After you "break role" debrief regarding what patterns you observed from preparing the compare-contrast dialogue. Comment on how successfully our government anticipated, or adjusted to, the crisis of assassination.

For discussion: Do Americans react similarly across this one-hundred-year time period to the death of their president? Do "symbols" of national unity provide comfort at such a time? How do succeeding vice presidents fare in this situation?