



Historic Speeches: *Discussion Guide*

Overview

“Presidential power,” political scientist Richard Neustadt wrote, “is the power to persuade.” Over the years, presidential efforts at persuasion have included countless speeches. Most were soon forgotten. Now and then, however, a leader scores a rhetorical bull’s-eye, thanks to skilled oratory, dramatic circumstances, or both. This quartet of clips shows how Presidents Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy, and Richard Nixon wielded words in the effort to inspire, explain, and even entertain.

Use this discussion guide and related videos in your classroom to introduce students to presidential speeches that made the history books.

Classroom Activities

1. Show the segment “President Lincoln: The Gettysburg Address” from the *Just a Few Words, Mr. Lincoln: The Story of the Gettysburg Address* video.
 - **Discussion:** Explain that the Gettysburg Address is probably the most famous speech in U.S. history. Encourage students to share ideas about why Americans regard Lincoln’s words so highly.
 - **Research:** The world, President Lincoln said, “can never forget what they did here.” Direct students or student groups to create posters that provide an overview of what happened at Gettysburg and explain why the battle was so pivotal.
2. Show the segment “A President With a Sense of Humor: Roosevelt Defends His Dog” from the *Archives of War: World War II: The Leaders* video. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)
 - **Discussion:** It may seem strange that a president would make a speech about a dog. Prod students to imagine President Roosevelt’s goals in doing so. (*Possible answers: to make his opponents seem ridiculous; to remind Americans not to believe everything they hear about him; to project confidence by seeming amused rather than defensive.*) Ask students if the speech meets the objectives that they identified.

- **Writing:** Assign students to write short stories in which someone uses humor to counteract an insult or falsehood.
 - **Research:** Divide the class into groups. Direct each group to research and report on a leader who used humor skillfully. Possibilities include Winston Churchill, Benjamin Franklin, John F. Kennedy, Abraham Lincoln, Ronald Reagan, and Harry Truman.
3. Show the segment “The Space Program” from the *Speeches from History: John F. Kennedy* video. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)
- **Writing:** Encourage students to picture themselves as editorial writers for major newspapers. Then tell them to write editorials that might have appeared the day after the president’s address. Each editorial should address both strengths and weaknesses of the speech.
 - **Graphic Organizer:** President Kennedy described space as “this new ocean.” Have students create Venn diagrams that identify similarities and differences between space and sea.
4. Show the segment “Nixon Resigns” from the *Speeches from History: Richard Nixon* video. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)
- **Vocabulary:** President Nixon framed his message largely in stark, simple language, but the words “abhorrent” and “vindication” also loomed large. Challenge students to define these terms and use them in sentences.
 - **Discussion:** “To leave office before my term is completed,” President Nixon stressed, “is abhorrent to every instinct in my body.” The First Lady, moreover, had counseled her husband not to resign. Yet he did. Invite students to reflect on whether they would have made the same decision. Why or why not?

Academic Standards

This discussion guide addresses the following national standards.

National Council for the Social Studies

<http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands/>

- Time, Continuity, and Change
- Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
- Power, Governance, and Authority

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>

- Civics
 - What is Government and What Should it Do? Understands ideas about civic life, politics, and government



- What are the Basic Values and Principles of American Democracy?
Understands the character of American political and social conflict and factors that tend to prevent or lower its intensity
- Language Arts
 - Viewing: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media
 - Writing: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process, Gathers and uses information for research purposes
 - Listening and Speaking: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes