

Modern America: *Discussion Guide*

Overview

Technology has brought the world to our doorsteps—and with it, global problems. Help your students understand the many issues America is facing at the start of the 21st century with this discussion guide and its related videos and activities.

They'll begin with a wide-ranging look at the challenges for our century. Then, they'll examine the legacy of Ronald Reagan and the ongoing struggle for a balanced budget. A portrait of Muslim-American fear after September 11 reveals just one of many ways the terrorist attacks have changed our country. The guide ends with an investigation of how the country's two major political parties incorporated 9/11 into their 2004 political conventions.

Classroom Activities

1. Show the “Challenges for Our Century” segment from the *Modern-Day America* program.
 - **Discussion:** What challenges for our century were named in the video? (*Globalization, which has brought a huge increase in international trade and the closer linking of the world's economies; pollution caused by burning oil and other fuels; rising oil prices; conflict in the Middle East; and terrorism.*) Are there any other challenges you think should have been included in the list? (*Answers will vary.*)
 - **Writing Activity:** Have students write a one-page essay in which they explain, in their own words, what they think the most-pressing issue facing the U.S. at the start of the 21st century is and why. You may want to allow students to use textbooks, library materials, and the Internet to obtain facts to support their opinions. Compile students' essays into a “Challenges for Our Century” anthology and make a copy for each student.
 - **Debating CAFTA:** As students hear in the video, “Globalization has meant a huge increase in international trade. Some Americans say this is bad because businesses move factories to other countries in search of lower labor costs, which means Americans lose jobs. Others argue that increased trade leads to the creation of new opportunities and new jobs.” This past summer's debate over CAFTA is a good example of the strong opinions held for both arguments. Divide the class into two groups, one supporting CAFTA and the other opposing it. Give students time in class to research their arguments, and then hold a class debate. After the debate, conduct a secret-ballot vote. How does the classroom vote compare with that of the

U.S. Congress? (House of Representatives = 217 votes for, 215 votes against, 2 not voting. Senate = 55 votes for, 45 votes against.)

2. Show the “A President’s Legacy” segment from the *Modern-Day America* program. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)
 - **Discussion:** Ask students: Why was President Reagan nicknamed “The Great Communicator”? (*The former actor was a skilled public speaker, who became known for his charm and ability to speak with confidence and optimism.*) What economic policies did Reagan successfully press through? (*Congress lowered taxes by 25 percent and cut more than 40 billion dollars from the budget by eliminating many federal jobs and reducing spending on social programs, such as welfare.*) Why did Reagan want to increase military spending? (*He considered the Soviet Union an ever-present threat and wanted to ensure that the U.S. military could meet any challenge.*)
 - **History Investigation:** Reagan promised to lower taxes and balance the federal budget during his 1980 campaign, but the nation was deeper in debt by the end of his second term than it had ever been. However, the idea of a balanced budget remained popular with the public. Working in small groups, have students research and report on the failed 1997 amendment to the Constitution and the successful Balanced Budget Act of 1997, which was signed by President Clinton. The following Web sites are good starting points:
 - <http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1996/issues/counterpt/9701/29/>
 - <http://www.cnn.com/2005/ALLPOLITICS/01/31/sotu.clinton1997/>
 - http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/budget/february97/budget_2-7.html
 - http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/budget/february97/budget_2-26.html
 - <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c105:H.R.2015.ENR:>
 - **Analyzing “The Great Communicator”:** Have students watch Reagan’s farewell address to the American public, paying particular attention to his manner and use of language. The speech, given January 11, 1989, is included in the *Speeches from History: Ronald Reagan* program. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.) Then, as a class, discuss the elements that made Reagan such a skilled public speaker.
3. Show the “Old Faith, New Prejudice: Muslim-American Fear After September 11” segment from *9/11 Backlash: Being Muslim in America* program. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)
 - **Discussion:** In the video, Tariq says, “Prior to September 11, I never felt different. I felt that I was just as American as anybody else. And I felt that nobody ever looked at me differently or I ever looked at anyone else differently.” Does his sentiment ring true for any students? Do students believe Muslims should be subject to extra scrutiny? Why or why not?
 - **Impressionable Images:** What happens when Santa’s stocking cap is replaced with a turban? Help students explore the way they make instant

judgments about people based on their attire with this excellent Images in Action activity created by the Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance project: http://www.tolerance.org/images_action/hint.jsp?id=32

- **Graphic Organizer:** Working individually or in small groups, have students learn more about the Islamic faith and its two major branches or sects, Sunni and Shia. Then, have them create a chart that compares and contrasts their beliefs and practices. The following Web sites are good starting points for student research:
 - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/>
 - http://islam.about.com/cs/divisions/f/shia_sunni.htm
4. Show the “Commemorating September 11, 2001, at the 2004 National Conventions” segment from *Campaign Essentials: Making the Message: The Fight for the President* program. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)
- **Discussion:** Ask students: In what ways did the 9/11 commemorations differ at the two political conventions? (*Answers will vary, but students may note that the Democrats had a moment of remembrance with a single speaker and a violin soloist while the Republicans had a night-long session complete with a slide show of images, a trio of family members, several prominent speakers, and the “singing cop.”*)
 - **Writing Activity:** Have students write a 500-word essay in which they answer the following questions:
 - Which commemoration do you think was most effective and why?
 - Should 9/11 commemorations have been included in the 2004 political conventions? Why or why not?
 - Had you seen either of the commemorations before this clip?
 - **Related Viewing:** In March 2004, President Bush used imagery of 9/11 in a TV ad campaign. Have students watch the four ads, one of which is in Spanish, and compare the ad's use of 9/11 imagery with the imagery used during the RNC convention's 9/11 commemoration.
 - <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/mmedia/politics/030304-2v.htm>

Academic Standards

National Council for the Social Studies

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has developed national standards to provide guidelines for teaching social studies. To view the standards online, go to <http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands/>.

This lesson plan addresses the following thematic standards:

- Culture
- Power, Governance, and Authority

- Global Connections

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

McREL's Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K–12 Education addresses 14 content areas. To view the standards and benchmarks, visit <http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>.

This lesson plan addresses the following national standards:

- History
 - United States History: Understands developments in foreign policy and domestic politics between the Nixon and Clinton presidencies; Understands economic, social, and cultural developments in the contemporary United States
 - Historical Understanding: Understands and knows how to analyze chronological relationships and patterns; Understands the historical perspective
- Language Arts
 - Writing: Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions; Gathers and uses information for research purposes
 - Viewing: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media