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GREAT SPEECHES FROM PAST PRESIDENTS

for Classroom Discussion

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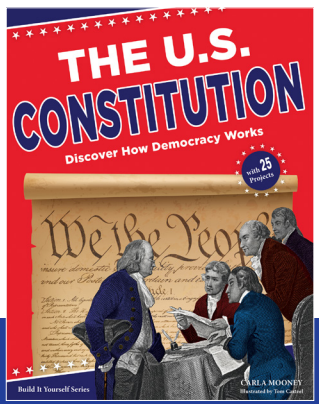
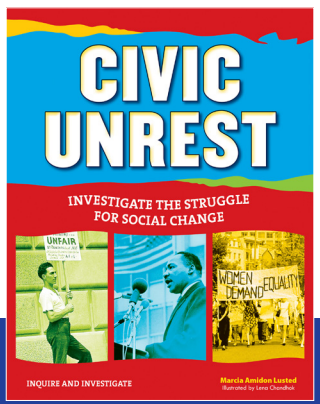
Being President of the United States is a tough job!

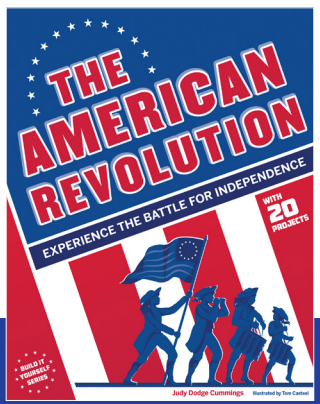
Not only do you need to ensure that the needs of all U.S. citizens are being met, you also need to maintain international relations with every other country in the world. Don't forget about the climate, the economy, terrorism, refugees, immigrants, and pandemics. That's a lot to worry about!

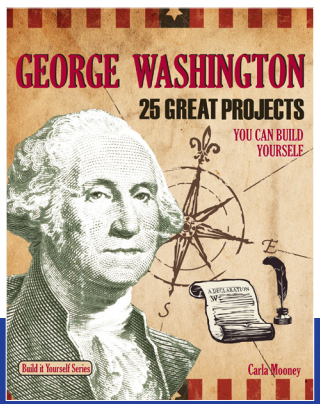
The speeches of past presidents provide important clues about their values, their policies, and their beliefs. What do these speeches tell us? Why is it important to read historical speeches from past presidents? In this ebook, students can read about five different presidents and examine excerpts from their important speeches. You'll also find essential questions for students to consider and discuss.

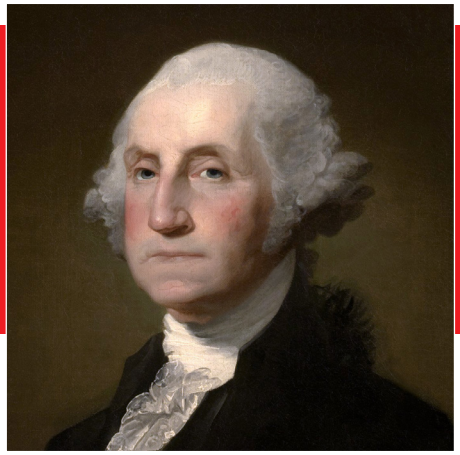
Want to learn more about democracy? Try these books from Nomad Press!











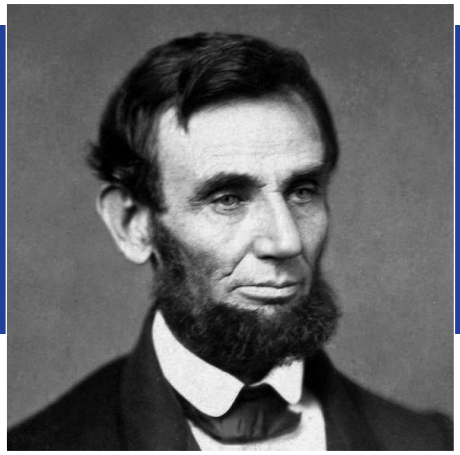
George Washington: The First President of the United States

President Washington served as president from 1789 to 1797, and he was encouraged to serve another term (this was before term limits were established) but refused. Because he was the first president this country ever had, he knew that everything he did might be followed as tradition by all other presidents. This made him very careful in how he behaved and how he governed. He wanted the presidency to be a formal, respected position that people looked up to as a model of democracy.

George Washington's Farewell Address:

> "The unity of Government, which constitutes you one people, is also now dear to you. It is justly so; for it is a main pillar in the edifice of your real independence, the support of your tranquillity at home, your peace abroad; of your safety; of your prosperity; of that very Liberty, which you so highly prize. But as it is easy to foresee, that, from different causes and from different quarters, much pains will be taken, many artifices employed, to weaken in your minds the conviction of this truth; as this is the point in your political fortress against which the batteries of internal and external enemies will be most constantly and actively (though often covertly and insidiously) directed, it is of infinite moment, that you should properly estimate the immense value of your national Union to your collective and individual happiness…"

- **Read the whole speech here.** (avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp)
  - What is it that President Washington is saying is important?
  - What is he warning people to guard against?
  - How is this language different from the language presidents use today?



Abraham Lincoln: The 16th President of the United States

Abraham Lincoln served as president from 1861 to 1865, and led the country through its bloodiest war, the Civil War. He oversaw a country split in two over the issue of slavery, and was an important part of the eventual abolition of slavery in this country. He was assassinated only a few weeks after the war ended.

On November 19, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln made a short speech to a crowd of people gathered in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, not even five months after more than 50,000 Americas died or were wounded on the battlefield during the Battle of Gettysburg. This speech, which is known as the Gettysburg Address, redefined the Civil War and helped shape the America that would come after the final surrender.

Here is the speech in its entirety.

> "Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth."

The Civil War (nomadpress.net/books/civil-war) is known as the war that ended slavery, but it was really a war to keep the nation of America from breaking apart.

- How does this idea come through in the speech?
- What line indicates Lincoln's ideas about slavery?
- How does Lincoln inspire a sense of responsibility in the people? What does he hope they will do?
- How does the Gettysburg Address apply to today's world?

Lyndon B Johnson: The 36th President of the United States

President Johnson began his presidency after the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, and served until 1969. While he was president, he signed an important bill into law called the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

President Johnson spoke to Congress upon the signing of the Civil Rights Act to remind the nation why this was important. Here is an excerpt from his speech.

> "Americans of every race and color have died in battle to protect our freedom. Americans of every race and color have worked to build a nation of widening opportunities. Now our generation of Americans has been called on to continue the unending search for justice within our own borders. We believe that all men are created equal. Yet many are denied equal treatment. We believe that all men have certain unalienable rights. Yet many Americans do not enjoy those rights. We believe that all men are entitled to the blessings of liberty. Yet millions are being deprived of those blessings—not because of their own failures, but because of the color of their skin. The reasons are deeply imbedded in history and tradition and the nature of man. We can understand—without rancor or hatred—how this all happened. But it cannot continue. Our Constitution, the foundation of our Republic, forbids it."

- **You can read the whole speech here.**
  (millercenter.org/president/speeches/speech-3525)
  - What are some examples of equal rights? Does everyone have equal rights in your own time? Why or why not?
  - Why is it important that we as a people follow the principles set forth in the U.S. Constitution? You can read the U.S. Constitution here. (constitutionus.com)

Ronald Reagan: The 40th President of the United States

President Ronald Reagan was an actor before he was president, and that might have benefitted his speech making capabilities! One of his more famous speeches is known as the Brandenburg Gate Speech. When he was president, the German city of Berlin was split into two parts, Eastern Berlin and Western Berlin, and a wall separated the two sections. Eastern Berlin was controlled by the Soviet Union, the country we now know as Russia, and Western Berlin was controlled by the Allies, including the United States, Great Britain, and France. People in Western Berlin were free to work the jobs they wanted and live where they wanted, while people in Eastern Berlin were under the rule of Communism.

For more information about Eastern and Western Berlin, visit this site. (jumpmag.co.uk/berlin-wall)

While on a visit to Berlin, President Reagan made a speech about the need for the wall to come down so all residents could have the same opportunities, free from the restraints of communism. Here is an excerpt from his speech, known as the Brandenburg Gate speech.

> "Behind me stands a wall that encircles the free sectors of this city, part of a vast system of barriers that divides the entire continent of Europe. From the Baltic South, those barriers cut across Germany in a gash of barbed wire, concrete, dog runs, and guard towers. Farther south, there may be no visible, no obvious wall. But there remain armed guards and checkpoints all the same—still a restriction on the right to travel, still an instrument to impose upon ordinary men and women the will of a totalitarian state."

- **You can read the entire speech here.**
  (greatamericandocuments.com/speeches/reagan-brandenburg-gate.html)
- **You can see a video clip here.**
  (youtube.com/watch?v=5MDFX-dNtsM)
  - Why does President Reagan refer to ordinary men and women in his speech? What does this accomplish?
  - Why was this speech more powerful because of where the President delivered it?

Barack Obama: The 44th President of the United States

President Barack Obama took office as the country was facing a huge financial crisis and experts were worried about a repeat of the Great Depression. He's famous for successfully diverting the country's financial failure and for being the first African American president of the United States. President Obama is a gifted speaker, and gave many speeches that people believe will be remembered in the future.

Perhaps the speech that will survive the longest in the American mind is the one he gave in Selma, Alabama, on March 7, 2015, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the "Bloody Sunday" civil rights march. On March 7, 1965, 600 civil rights marchers were attacked by state and local lawmen in Selma. Protestors tried again, accompanied by Martin Luther King, Jr., and they marched again a couple weeks later—by the time they got to their destination, Montgomery, the crowd had swelled to about 25,000 strong.

Here's an excerpt from President Obama's speech.

> "The Americans who crossed this bridge were not physically imposing. But they gave courage to millions. They held no elected office. But they led a nation. They marched as Americans who had endured hundreds of years of brutal violence, and countless daily indignities — but they didn't seek special treatment, just the equal treatment promised to them almost a century before.
>
> What they did here will reverberate through the ages. Not because the change they won was preordained; not because their victory was complete; but because they proved that nonviolent change is possible; that love and hope can conquer hate."

- **You can read the entire speech here.** (obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/03/07/remarks-president-50th-anniversary-selma-montgomery-marches)
- **You can listen to President Obama give the speech here.** (youtube.com/watch?v=7SoG4KZOvRc)
  - Why did Americans wait for more than 200 years to elect an African American president? Why is it important to ask this question?
  - Why are role models important for kids? Do you have a role model?
  - The right to protest is protected by the U.S. Constitution. Why did the country's founders consider this an important right for citizens to have?

READ!

Kids' Government Information
kids.usa.gov/government/presidents/index.shtml

Famous Speeches
vermont.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/the-us-presidency/?topic_id=1453

Kids in the White House
whitehousehistory.org/teacher-resources/first-kids

WATCH!

The Electoral College
youtube.com/watch?v=ZFJ2e82Nvnw

Kid President meets the President
youtube.com/watch?v=TssZ9Uma1-w

DO!

You Choose 2016
pbskids.org/youchoose

PBS: The U.S. Presidency
vermont.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/the-us-presidency/?topic_id=2052

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