

## *The Kennedys*

### *Teacher's Guide*

*The Kennedys* offers insights into American history topics including immigrant stories; the roaring twenties and the Great Depression; Boston politics; World War II; the presidency; the Cold War; anti-Communism; the civil rights movement; the Vietnam War; religion and politics; the role of money in the political process; questions of democracy, aristocracy, and meritocracy; celebrity in America; and public service. You can use part or all of the film, or delve into the rich resources available on this Web site to learn more, either in a classroom or on your own.

The following activities are grouped into 4 categories:

1. History
2. Economics
3. Civics
4. Geography

You can also read a few helpful hints for completing the activities.

## History

### Activity 1

Have the entire class read profiles of [John Fitzgerald Kennedy](#), [Robert Francis Kennedy](#), and [Ted Kennedy](#). Now divide the class into three groups. The first group should create a resume that John F. Kennedy might have prepared in 1960 if he were “applying” for the job of president. Include information on past jobs and accomplishments that Kennedy, as an applicant for the presidency, would want to emphasize. Also include his educational background and any personal information that might increase his chances of getting the job. (The group might want to assign different students to research different sections of the resume.) At the top of the resume, below his name, list some goals he planned to pursue if

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elected president. The other two groups should prepare similar resumes for Robert Kennedy in 1968 and Ted Kennedy in 1980.

When the groups are finished, circulate and compare the resumes. Which of the three do you think is the most impressive “application” for the presidency? What factors not shown on the resume might alter your opinion about which of the three candidacies most deserved to succeed?

### Activity 2

Read the [timeline](#). The Kennedys lived through and participated in many of the great events of the twentieth century, including the “roaring twenties,” the Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War, the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and the “Reagan revolution.” Choose one of these events and find a photograph, film clip, primary source, or song that in your view best captures the spirit of the time. (An example would be Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I have a dream” speech for the civil rights movement.) Then present this to the class, explaining the reasons for your choice, and describe how one or more of the Kennedys helped shape – and were shaped by – this era.

After everyone has made a presentation, hold a class debate on the following topic. *True or false: for all the power and celebrity the Kennedys obtained, they did not have a critical impact on any of the great events of the twentieth century.*

## Economics

### Activity 1

Read about the Kennedy [fortune](#). Unlike many wealthy families, the Kennedys were not wiped out by the stock market crash of 1929. Legend has it that not long before the crash, Joseph P. Kennedy decided to sell his considerable stock holdings after hearing an investment tip from a shoe-shiner. Kennedy reasoned that if shoe-shiners were peddling stock tips, the stock market boom had gotten out of hand and would lead to a bust, which in fact soon happened. The

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stock market boom of the 1990s likewise led to a crash, from which only a fortunate few investors were spared.

Divide the class into two groups, one responsible for the Crash of 1929 and the other responsible for the recent “dot com” crash. Each group should prepare a series of graphics – line or bar graphs, pie charts, tables, and so on – that dramatize the rapid changes of the period. (Examples include the changing level of the stock market, the changing value of selected individual stocks, the number of business bankruptcies, and unemployment.) Groups should present their graphics to the class (using Powerpoint or other presentation software if available) and should explain to the class the findings and significance of each graphic.

## Activity 2

Read about the Kennedy *fortune* and about the family’s involvement in American *politics*. As these essays and the film show, family wealth and the personal connections that flowed from it played an important role in the Kennedys’ political success, both by freeing them from the need to earn a living and by helping support their political campaigns. Family worth and connections also have been important for today’s most prominent political family, the Bushes. Using both John F. Kennedy and George W. Bush as examples, write a newspaper editorial of about 750 words arguing either that a family’s ability to use its wealth and power to promote the political ambitions of one of its members is good for the nation, or bad for the nation. Be sure to explain the reasons for your opinion.

## Civics

### Activity 1

Read John Kennedy’s inaugural speech. Perhaps the most widely quoted statement of Kennedy’s career is “ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” As president, Kennedy created the Peace Corps to help promote this belief in public service. Have each student who is involved in some volunteer or community service activity make a brief presentation to the class on the activity, how he or she became involved, and

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the ways in which this involvement helps both the community and the volunteer. (These activities need not be conducted through an organization; they can be informal activities such as helping a neighbor.) Students who are not currently involved in a volunteer or community service activity should find out about some program that is active in your community and describe it to the class.

### Activity 2

Read or listen to Kennedy’s speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association on September 12, 1960, in which he responded to certain concerns that had been raised regarding the issue of a Catholic running for President. As a class, answer the following questions: (a) What kinds of concerns had been expressed about his Catholicism? (b) How did Kennedy respond to those concerns? (c) Did Kennedy believe the issue of his Catholicism had received the right amount of attention during the campaign? Explain.

Now imagine that you are the first person of a particular group to be nominated by a major party for the office of President – for example, the first woman, the first African American or Hispanic, the first Muslim or Jew, or the first homosexual (or some combination of these). Write a speech in which you respond to the kinds of concerns that might be expressed about your candidacy. State in your speech whether you believe this element of your identity should be an important issue in the campaign, as well as whether you think this element of your identity could make you a better president than someone else (and if so, why). Read your speech to the class.

## Geography

### Activity 1

Read about President Kennedy’s [foreign policy](#). During Kennedy’s presidency, critical developments in the Cold War took place in various locations around the world. Divide the class into six groups and assign each one of the following locations: Berlin, Vienna, Laos, South Vietnam, Cuba (1961), Cuba (1962). Each group should prepare a five-minute

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presentation for the class explaining what event took place in its location (the group should identify the location for the class on a world map), the importance of the event for world peace at the time, and the group’s judgment of how well Kennedy handled the situation.

**Activity 2**

Have students count off from 1 to 43, each number corresponding to one of the nation’s 43 presidents – George Washington is number 1, John Adams is number 2, and so on. (Some students will have more than one number.) Have each student find the home state of the president corresponding to his or her number(s) and write the president’s name, years in office, and home town on a stickie. Going in chronological order, students should post the stickies on the appropriate state. When they are finished, discuss: which states “gave birth to” the most presidents? What factors might explain this? How many presidents has your state produced? What factors might explain this?

**Hints for the Active Learning Questions**

**History**

*Activity 1*

Significant factors not shown on the resume might include the other candidates in the race, public perceptions of the Kennedy candidate (including those resulting from events like Chappaquiddick), and the degree to which the Kennedy candidate had solutions to the problems then facing the nation.

At the end of the activity, ask students which qualifications they think are most important for the presidency. Have certain qualifications become more important (or less important) over time? Also, for extra credit, students could create resumes for other competing “applicants” for the presidency – [Richard Nixon](#) in 1960, [Eugene McCarthy](#) in 1968, and [Jimmy Carter](#) in 1980 – and compare these to the Kennedy that ran against each candidate.

*Activity 2*

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You also might want to discuss as a class what future historians may regard as the great event or events of the past two decades. How have members of the class been shaped by these events?

## Economics

### Activity 1

One helpful source of data is the Census Bureau, which publishes the annual Statistical Abstract of the United States (available at the Bureau's Web site, [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)) and the compilation *Historical Statistics, Colonial Times to 1970*.

### Activity 2

Editorials arguing that it is good for the nation might point out that both the Kennedys and the Bushes have a long tradition of public service. Editorials arguing that it is bad for the nation might contend that less-well-connected candidates aren't able to compete fairly under these conditions.

## Civics

### Activity 1

Information on prominent volunteer and service organizations can be found on the Web at sites such as [www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov), [www.americorps.gov](http://www.americorps.gov), and [www.cityyear.org](http://www.cityyear.org).

### Activity 2

(a) Concerns were expressed that Kennedy might violate the religious liberties of non-Catholics, that his loyalty would be divided between his country and his faith, and that he would let the Catholic Church determine his policies. (b) He stated that he believed in separation of church and state and in religious liberty, and that he made up his own mind about political issues. (c) He thought the issue had gotten too much attention, and that issues like Communism and poverty were more important.

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When students have finished their speeches, make a list on the board of current public figures who could conceivably become the first president in one of these categories.

## Geography

### *Activity 1*

To help groups understand how Kennedy's actions in each of these events could be interpreted in multiple ways, you might ask each group to prepare two headlines of the event it was assigned. Both headlines must be factually accurate, but they should convey significantly different interpretations of the event.

### *Activity 2*

Have the class note any trends over time as students place the stickies on the map: how has the geographic origin of American presidents changed over the past two centuries?

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