AMERICAN CIVIC HOLIDAY RESOURCES

PRESIDENTS' DAY

"Presidents as Drivers of Culture"
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The office of the President invites opportunities beyond Article II of the Constitution, which outlines the duties and responsibilities of the role. Embedded in the presidency, as in any leadership position, is the power to drive culture. How is this the case? Leaders, through the immense power they wield, the decisions they make, and the way they comport themselves and interact with others, shape culture—whether they recognize it or not.

Every member of society impacts culture, but leaders, by virtue of their public roles, have a more prominent and central influence. A question we can consider this Presidents Day is: How do they–and how should they?

In addition, students can reflect on how people across society influence culture and how they aspire to do so as future citizen-leaders of tomorrow. The accompanying activities will offer opportunities to bring these ideas into your classrooms and school communities. We welcome your feedback on how some of the important conversations take hold and inspire students to consider their own opportunities for impact.

Prelude Activity:

Objective: Examine how individuals can influence the culture around them through various roles and actions.

1. Students identify various aspects of culture.
2. Students discuss how three different roles of their choice (such as student, legislator, citizen) can shape culture.
3. Students analyze how these roles are distinct and where they overlap.
4. Students explore what would empower people in society to contribute more of what they have to positively influence culture.

Source 1: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Inaugural Address, March 4, 1941. Excerpt.

On each national day of Inauguration since 1789, the people have renewed their sense of dedication to the United States.

In Washington's day the task of the people was to create and weld together a Nation.

In Lincoln's day the task of the people was to preserve that Nation from disruption from within.

In this day the task of the people is to save that Nation and its institutions from disruption from without.

To us there has come a time, in the midst of swift happenings, to pause for a moment and take stock- to recall what our place in history has been, and to rediscover what we are and what we may be. If we do not, we risk the real peril of isolation, the real peril of inaction.

Lives of Nations are determined not by the count of years, but by the lifetime of the human spirit. The life of a man is three years and ten: a little more, a little less. The life of a Nation is the fullness of the measure of its will to live.

Class Exercise:

Divide students into groups. Each group reads the excerpt above and explores the following:

- How do the examples of the tasks presented to Washington, Lincoln, and FDR offer an opportunity to influence national culture?
- What would you recommend at each of these historical moments? (Students can research deeper to provide specific examples.)
- Is there a topic raised in the excerpt that you would connect with a present-day opportunity for cultural improvement? How are these moments similar? How are these moments unique?
- Each group presents their observations to the class.
- After the presentations, groups can assess which cultural opportunities raised are most meaningful to them and why.

Source 2: Ronald Reagan, Farewell Address, January 11, 1989. Excerpt.

And in all of that time I won a nickname, “The Great Communicator.” But I never thought it was my style or the words I used that made a difference: it was the content.I wasn't a great communicator, but I communicated great things, and they didn't spring full bloom from my brow, they came from the heart of a great nation -- from our experience, our wisdom, and our belief in the principles that have guided us for two centuries. They called it the Reagan revolution. Well, I'll accept that, but for me it always seemed more like the great rediscovery, a rediscovery of our values and our common sense.

Class Exercise:

- Which aspects of Reagan's message in this excerpt convey cultural values that are worthy of learning from and why?
- Do you think that humility in a leader is a strength or weakness, and why?
- How can leaders use their power of communication to elevate culture?
- Can you think of a person, whether historical or contemporary, renown or private- who earns your admiration as someone who has helped, or could propel culture toward a better place? Explain why?