

The Press Office: A Presidential News Conference Simulation

Topic: President Kennedy's Press Conferences

Grade Level: 9-12

Subject Area: US History after World War II

Time Required: 1-2 hours

Goals/Rationale

President Kennedy was the first US president to hold live televised press conferences. During his years in office he held, on average, one every sixteen days.

In this lesson, students act as members of President Kennedy's Press Office with an assignment to prepare a briefing for the president on topics that may come up in a specific press conference. To fulfill this assignment, students explore the Kennedy Library website, using both primary and secondary sources. As a culminating activity, students participate in a simulated press conference either virtually or in class.

Essential Question: How might a president address the public about important issues?

Objectives

Students will:

- discuss major events that occurred during President Kennedy's administration.
- discuss the role of the presidential press secretary and press conferences.
- conduct web-based research.
- analyze primary source documents and web-based materials.
- create press briefing materials for selected press conference dates.
- write appropriate and accurate press conference questions and answers.
- present orally their questions and answers for the press conference.

Connections to Curriculum (Standards):

National History Standards

US History: Postwar United States (1945 to early 1970s), Era 9: 2A, 2B, 2C, 3B, 4A.

World History: The 20th Century Since 1945: Promises and Paradoxes, Era 9: 1B.

Massachusetts History and Social Science Framework

USII.T3 (12); USII.T4 (4)(5)(6); USII.T5 (1); WHII.T5 (3); SCLA (1)(4)

Prior Knowledge and Skills

Students should have a working knowledge of US history prior to 1961. They should be able to use the Internet for research and analyze primary as well as secondary sources.

Historical Background and Context

Presidential press relations date back to George Washington who expressed dismay that his farewell address might not receive adequate press coverage due to its length. Theodore Roosevelt institutionalized the White House press corps by creating a press room and issuing credentials. The policy of regular weekly press conferences began with Roosevelt's successor, William

Howard Taft. All presidents from Taft to Herbert Hoover met with the press regularly, answering written questions. Attribution was restricted and direct quotation was never permitted. The revolution in communications brought about by electronic media changed this forever. Starting with Harry S. Truman, press conferences were electronically recorded. The president was, therefore, speaking "on the record." The electronic record made charges of misquotation easy to resolve. The emergence of television fundamentally changed presidential relations with the press, and led to the creation of a central office in the Eisenhower administration. The press secretary became a reliable and regular source of all official communication.

The press secretary's central role continued in the Kennedy administration. Kennedy's press secretary, Pierre Salinger, handled the flow of news from the entire executive branch of government as well as from Kennedy's office. One of Salinger's responsibilities was to prepare the president for his televised press conferences.

The day before each press conference, Kennedy's press office would agree on the 20-30 questions they believed would be asked by correspondents. Pierre Salinger noted in his memoirs that the public information officers were excellent at anticipating questions. For questions "in sensitive areas," the staff would provide a background briefing and a suggested response.

Salinger would supply the president with briefing papers the evening before the press conference. The next morning, at breakfast, the president would meet with Salinger and other White House staff members or cabinet officers to practice. Kennedy usually would require more facts for 6-8 questions and, after the morning meeting, Salinger would work on researching the requested information. An hour before the 4:00 PM press conference, Salinger would go over the new information with Kennedy.

Materials

- [The Presidential Press Office](#) web page
- President Kennedy's [Press Conferences](#)
- "John F. Kennedy: Launching into the Sixties" (*included in this pdf*)
- Press Program Worksheet (*included in this pdf*)
- August 10, 1961 press conference briefing paper (*included in this pdf*)

Procedure

1. Distribute the "John F. Kennedy: Launching into the Sixties" article. Ask students to read the handout and answer the questions. This will provide them with some background information about the time period. (This can be assigned for homework.)
2. Ask students to read the web page [The Presidential Press Office](#). (This can be assigned for homework.) Discuss the extensive preparation by Kennedy and his staff for each press conference. Why might Kennedy have chosen to participate in so many press conferences during his tenure in office? Why might Kennedy have spent so much time preparing for these press conferences? Do they believe a president should have frequent press conferences? Why or why not?
3. Distribute the Press Program Worksheet. Divide students into groups of 2-5 and give each group a press conference date. Have students complete the worksheet, either in groups or individually from their homes using the [Kennedy Library website](#) for their source material. Remind them that they need to use at least one primary source available on the website as part of their background information. They should not use Kennedy's press conferences as a

primary source. Suggest that they use the search function on the [Kennedy Library website](#) to find relevant information.

4. Ask each group of students to meet separately to go over their findings and select a topic which they would like to use in the press conference. In their groups, students should then develop one question Kennedy might be asked on that press conference date, and the answer to that question.
5. Have students choose someone in their group to be President Kennedy and another person to be a reporter.
6. Have each group give their question to the reporter in another group.
7. As a full class, facilitate a simulated press conference with each reporter asking each President Kennedy a question.
8. Correct any factual errors that students may have included in their press conference responses after each President Kennedy speaks.
9. After each President Kennedy answers a question, have students consider the information provided by the president and create a potential newspaper headline based on the presentation. This can be a headline found in a more "serious" daily newspaper, or a tabloid-style headline. This task can be done individually by students or as a group.
 - If this task is performed as a group, a spokesperson in each group will share their headline with the entire class.
 - If students are participating individually, they will create their individual headlines to share with the class.
10. Award a point to the group or individual that you determine has the most creative headline. Tally up the points at the end and identify a winner.

Assessment

The assessment for each group will be based on appropriateness of their press conference question and the accuracy, appropriateness, and depth of the answer provided by the President Kennedy in each group.

Extensions

1. Have students read the [transcripts](#) from President Kennedy's press conference for their assigned date. Assign them to write a report on the actual questions asked at the press conference and whether or not one of their questions and/or answers matched those of President Kennedy. Was there a particular focus of the questions asked by reporters? Were students surprised by the issues raised or questions asked? If the issue the students raised in their simulated press conference matched one in the actual press conference, how closely did Kennedy's answer match their own? How might they have strengthened their answers?
2. Have students use their completed worksheets to create a formal press briefing document that includes (a) a potential question Kennedy may be asked on their press conference date, (b) a "current situation report," and (c) "suggested points for the president's reply." They should follow the form of the [August 10, 1961 press conference briefing paper](#).
3. Have students research any additional information that they did not find on the Kennedy Library website that would have been useful in developing an answer to the press conference question they created.

John F. Kennedy: Launching into the Sixties

A NEW DECADE

“Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans,” John F. Kennedy declared in his inaugural address on January 20, 1961. The new president challenged Americans with the famous words, “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.”

President Kennedy was confronted with obstacles and issues that would define much of the 1960s: the Cold War, the Space Race, and the battle for civil rights.

THE COLD WAR

A struggle between the Soviet Union and the U.S. developed after World War II in a fight for power and control over Europe and the emerging nations in Asia and Africa. This “Cold War” between the Soviet Union’s communist system of government and America’s capitalistic system formed the backdrop of most foreign and domestic policy-making of the early 1960s.

The 1960 presidential campaign was dominated by Cold War rhetoric. John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon both pledged to strengthen American military forces, and both promised a tough stance against the Soviet Union and international communism.

Bay of Pigs

During the period between the election and his inauguration, Kennedy was briefed on a CIA plan developed with the Eisenhower Administration to train Cuban exiles for an invasion of their homeland. The United States was distrustful of Fidel Castro, the leader of Cuba, and wary of his relationship with Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet premier. The plan anticipated that support from the Cuban people and perhaps even from elements of the Cuban military would lead to the overthrow of Castro and the establishment of a non-communist government friendly to the United States. On April 17, 1961, 1,400 Cuban exiles landed at the Bay of Pigs in southeastern Cuba. The expected support was not there, and the entire force was killed or captured. Kennedy took full responsibility for the failure of the operation.

Berlin

In June 1961, President Kennedy traveled to Vienna, Austria for a summit with Nikita Khrushchev. Not only was the summit unsuccessful in its goal of building trust between the two countries, but it raised tensions between the two superpowers--particularly in discussions regarding the city of Berlin.

Berlin was at the heart of the Cold War. At the end of World War II, the Allied powers (the U.S., France and England) and the Soviet Union divided Germany into two territories. West Germany, occupied by the United States, was a capitalistic democracy. East Germany, occupied by the Soviet Union, was a communist territory. The city of Berlin, located in East Germany, was also divided. Though surrounded by East Germany, half of Berlin—West Berlin—was part of West Germany. Many East Germans who did not want to live in a communist country were moving to West Berlin, where they could either settle or find transportation to the west.

During the June 1961 Vienna Summit, Khrushchev threatened Kennedy that he would sign a separate peace treaty with East Germany, effectively cutting off Allied access to West Berlin.

Kennedy was startled by Khrushchev's combative style and tone and was unsettled by the premier's threat. When he returned to the United States he told the American people that the United States might need to defend militarily our rights to Berlin. He ordered substantial increases in American intercontinental ballistic missile forces, he added five new army divisions, and he increased the nation's air power and military reserves.

By 1961, four million East Germans had moved west. This was not only a symbolic problem for Khrushchev—an illustration of the dissatisfaction of East Germans with their way of life—but an economic one as well, since East Germany was losing its workers. To stop the flood of people into West Germany, Khrushchev ordered the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961. The massive wall of concrete blocks divided the city of Berlin in half, and provided a physical symbol of the Iron Curtain.

The escalation of tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States continued. Though Kennedy chose not to challenge directly the Soviet Union's building of the Berlin Wall, he resumed testing nuclear weapons in early 1962, following the lead of the Soviet Union.

Space

In April 1961, the Soviet Union sent the first human, Yuri Gagarin, into orbit. America was lagging behind in space exploration, and President Kennedy became intent on winning the Space Race.

Although initially cautious regarding the costs of the space program, President Kennedy came to recognize the significance of the Space Race since leadership in space was seen as a sign of world leadership. In May 1961, after Gagarin's space flight, President Kennedy challenged the Congress and the nation to work towards a new objective in space exploration: "I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth."

The Cuban Missile Crisis

In the summer of 1962, Khrushchev reached a secret agreement with the Cuban government to supply nuclear missiles capable of protecting the island against another US-sponsored invasion. In mid-October, American spy planes photographed the missile sites under construction. Kennedy responded by placing a naval blockade, which he referred to as a "quarantine," around Cuba. He also demanded the removal of the missiles and the destruction of the sites. Recognizing that the crisis could easily escalate into nuclear war, Khrushchev finally agreed to remove the missiles in return for an American pledge not to reinvade Cuba. In a separate deal, which remained secret for more than twenty-five years, the United States also agreed to remove its nuclear missiles from Turkey. But the end of Cuban Missile Crisis did little to ease the tensions of the Cold War. The Soviet leader decided to commit whatever resources were required for upgrading the Soviet nuclear strike force. His decision led to a major escalation of the nuclear arms race.

In June 1963, President Kennedy spoke at the American University commencement in Washington, DC. He urged Americans to critically reexamine Cold War stereotypes and myths and called for a strategy of peace that would make the world safe for diversity. In the final months of the Kennedy presidency Cold War tensions seemed to soften as the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was negotiated and signed. In addition, Washington and Moscow established a direct line of communication known as the "Hotline" to help reduce the possibility of war by miscalculation.

Vietnam

In May 1961, JFK had authorized sending 500 Special Forces troops and military advisers to assist the government of South Vietnam. They joined 700 Americans already sent by the Eisenhower administration. In February 1962, the president sent an additional 12,000 military advisers to support the South Vietnamese army. By early November 1963, the number of US military advisers had reached 16,000.

Even as the military commitment in Vietnam grew, JFK told an interviewer, "In the final analysis, it is their war. They are the ones who have to win it or lose it. We can help them, we can give them equipment, we can send our men out there as advisers, but they have to win it—the people of Vietnam against the Communists. . . . But I don't agree with those who say we should withdraw. That would be a great mistake. . . . [The United States] made this effort to defend Europe. Now Europe is quite secure. We also have to participate—we may not like it—in the defense of Asia." In the final weeks of his life, JFK wrestled with the need to decide the future of the United States commitment in Vietnam—and very likely had not made a final decision before his death.

CIVIL RIGHTS

Just as the televised images of East Germans making daring escapes into West Berlin captured the misery of people living behind the Iron Curtain, the images of African Americans assaulted by police officers and angry mobs revealed to the world that not all Americans were treated as equal citizens. Though the civil rights movement had achieved important victories in the 1950s, even more work and struggle lay ahead.

In most Southern states, segregation was the rule of law. There were separate schools, separate seats on buses, and separate areas in restaurants for whites and for blacks. In addition, most African Americans were unable to exercise their fundamental right to vote because of state and local laws.

When Kennedy became president in 1961, he was in a difficult position. African Americans had not only provided crucial votes in his narrow victory over Richard Nixon, but they were also long due a friend in the White House. However, in the first months of his administration, Kennedy decided to defer civil rights legislation in order to avoid alienating powerful Southern Democrats whose support was needed for the passage of his domestic legislative program. Instead, relying on executive authority, he appointed unprecedented numbers of African Americans to high-level positions in the new administration and his Justice Department, led by his brother Robert, turned their attention to voting rights, initiating five times the number of suits brought during the previous administration. But, events would force President Kennedy to become more actively involved in the civil rights movement and lead him to sponsor comprehensive civil rights legislation.

In May 1961, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), led by James Farmer, organized integrated "freedom rides" to defy segregation in interstate transportation (seating on buses, facilities in waiting rooms such as rest rooms, and restaurants). Committed to Gandhian principles of nonviolence, the Freedom Riders faced white racists intent on violence. Though firebombed, assaulted, and beaten, the Freedom Riders did not respond in kind.

President Kennedy preferred a non-confrontational, legal approach to solving the issue of discrimination in America. When first faced with the fierce violence unleashed on the Freedom Riders, the president was initially hesitant to act. However, Attorney General Robert Kennedy soon sent federal marshals to protect the Freedom Riders on their journey through the Deep South. Within months, the Interstate Commerce Commission ordered the desegregation of facilities associated with interstate travel.

In September 1962, the nation faced the threat of racial violence in the state of Mississippi. An African American Air Force veteran named James Meredith applied to the all-white University of Mississippi. After lengthy legal battles, Meredith was admitted to “Ole Miss,” as the university was called, but the Governor of Mississippi, Ross Barnett, and school officials refused to register him. On television and around the state, Governor Barnett was rallying white resistance and anger against Meredith and the federal government. The president and his brother, Robert Kennedy, had long telephone conversations with Governor Barnett, but these conversations failed to produce a solution. Four times federal marshals accompanied James Meredith as he attempted to register, and each time Meredith was turned away. On September 30th, Meredith arrived on campus as a crowd gathered to prevent his registration. A riot began, claiming the lives of two men and causing hundreds of injuries. Kennedy was forced to federalize the National Guard and send in thousands of army troops. Order was restored early the next morning, and James Meredith enrolled.

A year later, in June 1963, President Kennedy had to confront another southern governor intent on preserving segregation. Governor George Wallace of Alabama declared in his inaugural address that he supported “segregation today, segregation tomorrow and segregation forever.” Governor Wallace would not allow two African American students entry into the University of Alabama. This time, the president called out the National Guard immediately to protect the students, and the two were enrolled without violence.

In response to the University of Alabama crisis, President Kennedy gave a memorable address to the nation on civil rights. He told Americans that civil rights was a “moral issue,” one as “old as the scriptures and as clear as the American Constitution.” In this speech, President Kennedy at last urged the Congress to face the problems of discrimination and inequality. He said that the crisis “cannot be quieted by token moves or talk. It is time to act in the Congress, in your state and local legislative bodies, and, above all, in all of our daily lives.”

From the hesitant first steps to protect the Freedom Riders in 1961 to the bold legislation presented to the Congress in June of 1963, President Kennedy was a man changed by events. Though the president was uncomfortable with public protests, he met with the leaders of the March on Washington in August of 1963, and shook Dr. King’s hand, saying, “I have a dream.”

THE PRESIDENT IS SHOT

On November 21, 1963, the president and Mrs. Kennedy flew to Texas for several speaking engagements. The next day, as his car drove slowly past cheering crowds in Dallas, shots rang out. Kennedy was seriously wounded by gunshots and died a short time later. Within hours of the shooting, Lee Harvey Oswald was arrested for the murder of the president. On a plane back to Washington D.C., Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn in as the 36th president, with Jacqueline Kennedy by his side.

On November 24th, Oswald was shot and killed by Jack Ruby, thus silencing the only person who could have offered more information on the tragic event.

John F. Kennedy was President of the United States for little more than a thousand days. In that short time, Kennedy showed a willingness to grow, to ask questions of his assumptions of the world, and to challenge Americans to do the same. Always a Cold War warrior and a competitor, the president established a direct line of communication with the Soviets, and managed to negotiate a treaty to limit nuclear weapons testing. On civil rights, Kennedy was at first reluctant to get involved to help the cause, but in his final months as president, he gave a speech that Martin Luther King called a “masterpiece.”

Not only had President Kennedy changed and grown during his time in office, but many Americans had followed his lead.

Questions to Consider:

1. What happened at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba during April 1961?
2. What events related to Berlin in the early 1960s escalated Cold War tensions?
3. How was the Space Race connected to the Cold War?
4. How did JFK handle the placement of Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1962?
5. What events illustrated a de-escalation of Cold War tensions in 1963?
6. Why were many African Americans disappointed with Kennedy in the first years of his presidency?
7. How and why did President Kennedy's position on civil rights legislation evolve during his time in office?

Press Conference Worksheet

President Kennedy was the first US president to hold live televised press conferences. During his years in office, he held 64 news conferences, an average of one every sixteen days.

You are a member of President Kennedy's Press Office with an assignment to prepare a briefing for the president on topics that may come up in a specific press conference. To fulfill this assignment, you must explore the [John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum website](#) to discover pertinent primary and secondary sources, following these steps:

1. List the events that occurred during the range of dates noted to the right of your press conference date.
2. List key questions reporters might ask about the events.
3. Provide background information that might help the president respond to these questions.
4. Select one question and provide a suggested answer to the question.
5. Note if there is additional information about this event that could not be found on the Kennedy Library website that would help you better prepare the president for the press conference.

Team Members:

Circle the press conference date you have been assigned.

1. April 21, 1961 (Address events between 2/1/61 and 4/21/61.)
2. June 28, 1961 (Address events between 4/22/61 and 6/28/61.)
3. August 30, 1961 (Address events between 6/29/61 and 8/30/61.)
4. November 20, 1962 (Address events between 9/1/62 and 11/20/62.)
5. August 20, 1963 (Address events between 6/1/63 and 8/20/63.)
6. October 9, 1963 (Address events between 8/21/63 and 10/9/63.)
7. November 14, 1963 (Address events between 10/10/63 and 11/14/63.)

Complete the information on the following pages:

Press Conference Worksheet

Date of Press Conference: _____

1. What events occurred within two months prior to this date (list 2-3)?

2. Construct 3 key questions reporters might ask about at least one of these events.

(1)

(2)

(3)

3. What background information can you provide that might help the president respond to these questions? Use at least one primary source from the [Kennedy Library website](#) for this information. Cite your sources.

Question #1 Background Information

Question #2 Background Information

Question #3 Background Information

4. Based on the background information you have collected, select one question and provide a suggested answer to the question. Make sure you choose a question for which you have a complete answer. Write out your chosen question and write your answer below:

PRESIDENT'S PRESS CONFERENCE

AUGUST 10, 1961

SUBJECT: FLIGHT OF REFUGEES FROM EAST GERMANY

QUESTION:

There have been a number of reports recently of unrest in East Germany. Reports from Berlin also indicate that the flow of refugees from East Germany is turning into a flood. There has been some speculation that these developments might portend a revolt in East Germany, similar to the one which took place in 1953. Would you care to comment on this?

CURRENT SITUATION REPORT:

1. There have been many reports recently of increased unrest in East Germany. Most of them have been related to unsatisfactory economic conditions, particularly food shortages.
2. There has also been a sharp increase in the flow of refugees to West Berlin. During July, over 30,000 refugees were registered. The rate during this period was considerably heavier than during previous weeks, the heaviest in fact since 1956 - the previous record.
3. Chancellor Adenauer recently characterized the situation in East Germany as one of "panic."

SUGGESTED POINTS FOR THE PRESIDENT'S REPLY

1. The Government has received a number of reports which indicate that the people of East Germany are unhappy with economic conditions. They are particularly disgruntled over food shortages, caused by the regime's agricultural policies.
2. There has also in past couple of weeks been an increase in the refugee flow to West Berlin. This is at least partially due to the fear that the East German regime may take measures designed to halt this loss of its manpower.
3. I think the thing to keep in mind is that these difficulties are a direct result of communist policies. The food shortages result from the East German regime's attempt to force the farmer

into

into the strait jacket of collectivization. The normal flow of refugees has been compounded by fears resulting from Soviet threats regarding Berlin.

4. We have the greatest sympathy for the people in East Germany. We sincerely hope that the Soviet Union and the East German regime will try to ease the tension, by diverting the energies they are now devoting to their campaign on West Berlin into an effort to improve the welfare of the people.

5. As to the possibility of a recurrence of the June 17, 1953 uprising in East Germany and our attitude thereto, I would not care to comment on such a hypothetical question except to note that the refugee situation and its possible consequences are fraught with danger to both sides, and I hope that the Soviet and East German leaders will keep this very much in mind.

EUR - Mr. Tyler (MJSpear)

Clearances: GER - Mr. Brandin
EUR/P - Mr. Jerabeke
SOV/P - Mr. Klein
P - Mr. Stern