

## Shaping Public Perception: The Presidency on Film

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### INTRODUCTION

I teach government to seniors in a large urban public high school. One of the most daunting tasks I am required to do each year is to help my students break free of a lifetime of misperception, misunderstanding, and uncritical acceptance of information. The majority of students have spent precious little time examining the ideas and information they have gathered over the years. One of my prime goals is to help foster an atmosphere of inquiry and critical thought, pushing students to be more aware of forces that attempt to shape their perceptions.

This curriculum unit is designed to explore how movies and television shape the American view of the presidency. The students will have a selection of movies and television shows portraying the President of the United States, both fictional and historical. They will choose two to watch and will then have activities designed to help them analyze the portrayal of the president as well as the potential influence that portrayal might have on public consciousness. Through these activities, students will be able to separate the reality of the executive branch from the distortion of image created by Hollywood. They will then be able to better understand the powers and limitations of the office, and to evaluate our president's actions in a more realistic manner, ultimately becoming more knowledgeable voters. This unit was designed for use in any government class in any high school.

### OBJECTIVES

#### TEKS: Government

The student will:

#### *Government*

- understand the roles played by the media in the U.S. political system. (3A)
- understand the structure and functions of the government created by the U.S. Constitution. (9)
- analyze the structure and functions of the executive branch of government, including the constitutional powers of the president. (9B)

#### *Citizenship*

- analyze the factors that influence an individual's political attitudes and actions. (16C)
- compare and evaluate characteristics, style, and effectiveness of state and national leaders, past and present. (16D)
- express and defend a point of view on an issue of contemporary interest in the United States. (17C)

#### *Social Studies Skills*

- create a product on a contemporary government issue or topic using critical methods of inquiry. (21B)

- analyze and evaluate the validity of information from primary and secondary sources for bias, propaganda, point of view, and frame of reference. (21D)
- use social studies terminology correctly. (22A)
- use standard grammar, spelling, sentence structure, and punctuation. (22B)
- create written, oral, and visual presentations of social studies information. (22D)

## **RATIONALE**

It is often said that “perception is reality;” as people see the world, they create for themselves their own unique understanding of how things work. They then act as if this creation is true, and therefore shape reality accordingly. Thus their self-fulfilling prophecy allows them to feel satisfied with their grasp of the mechanics of the world. As teachers, it is incumbent upon us to help students develop an accurate picture, one based on authentic information and rational interpretation. In the classes I teach in the fall semester, Government and Psychology, I find myself constantly struggling to overcome preconceived notions and to create the cognitive dissonance necessary for the students to gain more precision in their worldview. This is especially important in Government, since, as citizens of a democracy, the students will be expected to influence and evaluate policy and performance in the future. Any comprehensive government class, then, must include opportunities for the students to identify and analyze some of the sources of their own perceptions, with an eye toward learning the vital critical thinking processes that allow them to take control of those perceptions.

Entertainment media are some of the most potent sources of perception – and misperception – about government. Movies and television programs present finished pictures of how officials make decisions or what motivations push them. Viewers are given nice tidy packages which they can ingest whole, often adopting the film-makers’ interpretations in their entirety. Far too many in the audience lack either the will or the capability to evaluate what they see or even to know what questions to ask to assess the accuracy of a film. Every election cycle, I am reminded of the CNN news item in August 2000, in which a large number of voters expressed their wish to vote for Jed Bartlett, Martin Sheen’s character from the television program, *The West Wing*, instead of either of the major party candidates (Nissen). When a show can make such a hero of a fictional character, it demonstrates the medium’s power to shape the attitudes of viewers. This curriculum unit will allow students to examine some images of the presidency as created by Hollywood, and to analyze the possible impact of those images on the consciousness of the voter.

## **UNIT BACKGROUND**

Visual media have much more power than the written word to alter student’s perceptions. Reading an account of presidential powers, especially one from a dry and tedious textbook, conveys little to most students about the effects of those powers or the ways they may be wielded. *Independence Day*, however, shows a dynamic President Whitmore, responding to a devastating global threat with decisiveness and action, even to the point of leading armed forces into battle personally to ensure the survival of the human species. Who would not cheer for a leader who puts his life on the line to protect his country or his planet?

I witnessed that cheering – literally – when I watched the movie for the first time. When President Whitmore gave his climactic, inspirational speech to his makeshift air force, the audience around me broke into loud applause and cheering (which was doubly interesting, given that I was watching the film in a theater in Houston and that President Whitmore had just ordered the nuclear bombing of Houston in the movie a few minutes before). At that moment, the people in the audience were enthralled by the image of a heroic president, not just giving orders and executing governmental functions from the White House, but actually leading men in a desperate battle to save the world. No tiresome budget conferences, no endless wrangling with a hostile Congress – this was a man of action, and the audience was very much impressed.

Not everyone was so enthralled by President Whitmore, however. One BBC reviewer had this to say about that very same speech:

President [Whitmore] delivers a Fourth of July speech that must surely win the prize for the most jaw-droppingly pompous soliloquy ever delivered in a mainstream Hollywood movie. (Smith, N.)

Considering the vast number of pompous speeches given in decades of movie-making, that is damning criticism indeed. And it is telling that this viewpoint comes from a foreign source, one who has a different image of the presidency than the American people.

Contrast the climax of *Independence Day* with the actual events from the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, as seen in Michael Moore's documentary *Fahrenheit 9-11*. President Bush was putting in an appearance in a Florida elementary school classroom and was criticized by many for remaining there for a quarter of an hour after the second plane hit the World Trade Center. Vice President Cheney was made the butt of numerous jokes on late night TV after his move to an "undisclosed location" for several days subsequent to the attack. In the first instance, the President showed what many people consider a natural and temporary indecision in the face of an unexpected and unparalleled attack. In the second, the primary goal was to ensure continuity of command, and protecting the vice president was a vital component of that goal. Yet, when viewed through the lens of President Whitmore, the actions of the president and vice president in September 2001 seemed to many to be less than heroic or decisive.

Moore's documentary, then, proffered an anti-heroic view of President Bush. If it had been the only imagery that was available to voters, then what followed might have been different. However, the administration had been cultivating imagery of its own. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, President Bush naturally turned nearly the entire focus of his administration to national defense. In short order, US forces were engaged in Afghanistan, and soon had brought down the Taliban government and replaced it with a nominally democratic one. Within a few more months, accompanied initially by overwhelming American support, US military force had defeated the Iraqi army and captured Saddam Hussein. However the public may view that war now, there's no denying that at the time the President's popularity was running high, and most Americans felt jubilant that we had struck back and showed our enemies that they could not attack us without retribution. The defining image for the President was his May 1, 2003, landing on the *USS Abraham Lincoln*, fully dressed in an air force flight suit, alongside the banner reading "Mission Accomplished." Again, whatever this particular image may have come to mean in subsequent years, at the time it was, for many people, a stirring moment; and at least in the short term, it paid dividends for the President.

The desire for a man of action, one that will protect the country from all enemies, pervades the consciousness of the American electorate, especially after 2001. Polls during the 2004 election consistently showed President Bush leading Senator Kerry by large margins in foreign policy and defense issues. A Brookings Institute analyst directly ascribed the victory by President Bush to his perceived experience and success in defending the country since the 9/11 attacks ("Post-Election Analysis"). Michael Moore's film notwithstanding, President Bush and his team worked hard to create the image of an administration that can effectively deal with the threats that face the nation. During the 2004 election, that effort paid off.

One of the most intriguing aspects of this desire of the American people for an action-oriented President is how disassociated from the reality of the office such a perception actually is. The fictional President Whitmore aside, it is not the job of the President of the United States to lead men into battle or to personally fight enemies of the country. John Keegan, the British military historian, has written about the change in military leadership that has come since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As armies got bigger and bigger, and generals no longer led men personally into battle,

cognitive dissonance has created an identity crisis for many of those leaders. Men die on their orders, while they are safe far behind the lines. According to Keegan, the suppressed guilt from this circumstance causes generals to act more war-like than the warriors. He particularly cites World War II General George Patton as an example of this phenomenon, with respect to the famous incidents of him slapping soldiers for “cowardice.” We now recognize that these soldiers were suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, what in World War II was called “battle fatigue” and in World War I “shell shock.” Psychologists now see Patton’s anger as a projection of his own inner guilt. Men died on his orders, yet most of the time he himself was in safety. He was unable to deal with this self-reproach, and externalized it as disgust with someone else’s perceived weakness. By assaulting those soldiers, he was really striking at himself (Keegan 274).

Presidents face the same dilemma. They order military forces into harm’s way, orders that inevitably cost the lives of some of our serving men and women. And yet, the presidents themselves do not share the same risk. It is easy to see how the same mechanism Keegan identified would affect political leaders as well as military. It is tempting to see the image of President Bush landing on the *Lincoln* as his playing out this same projection, showing everyone that he was just another one of the boys serving his country. As Barbara Tuchman wrote in her classic history of World War I, *The Guns of August*, Kaiser Wilhelm liked to dress up in military uniforms and play soldier as well (Tuchman 97).

The nature of democracy puts presidents under special pressure to appear strong and capable of personal action. The American public suffers from that same cognitive dissonance, and, thus, though we ourselves are in no danger, we need to feel that we have a proxy who could duke it out with our enemies if he had to. Since the president is the only official elected by the entire country, he becomes that proxy, and all of our desire to be able to act out against our enemies is projected onto him. Therefore, we cheer President Whitmore leading the near-suicidal attack against the alien ship. In an even more personal display of masculine prowess, we applaud as Harrison Ford takes on and kills terrorists in *Air Force One*. Movies like these create an expectation in a voter’s subconscious. Yes, intellectually that voter may know that the president is never going to have to punch out a bad guy, but on a gut level, he still wants him to be able to do so.

In times of war, such presentations of an action-oriented president are common and help create expectations that the current occupant of the White House feels that, at least to some extent, he must live up to. They are not, however, the only images of the presidency available on film. Besides the man of action, one common presidential trope of Hollywood is the cool “man at the helm” during an international or domestic crisis, sometimes military, but if so, more limited in scope than a war. Films such as *Thirteen Days*, *Failsafe*, and even the “President’s Daughter Is Kidnapped” arc on the television show *The West Wing* are examples of this genre. *Thirteen Days*, for an example, is the based-on-a-true-story account of President Kennedy’s handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Kennedy is the arbitrator and decision-maker, but it is other men who are the doers.

This film in particular had a difficult image to create. President Kennedy is still revered by many baby boomers who were first enthralled by his charisma, and he has a reputation way out of line with the actual accomplishments of his presidency. The film-makers had to create a movie image that would jibe with those perceptions. In doing so, they created a popular movie that not only was seen by large audiences in the theater, but has also been shown in countless US History classes in high schools across the country. *Thirteen Days*, therefore, has had a major impact on the notion of presidential leadership. As thousands of high school students can doubtless attest, it has fixed in their minds one clear image of what a leader is and how he should demonstrate leadership. This is particularly important because of one of the major unhistorical aspects of the movie. The central character is Kenneth O’Donnell (Kevin Costner), who was political advisor to the President. As Professor Michael Nelson put it:

Yet stiffening spines is one of O'Donnell's main functions in *Thirteen Days*. You come away thinking that President Kennedy could never have made his televised speech to the nation and Robert Kennedy would have flubbed his presentation of the administration's crisis-ending compromise to the Soviet ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, if O'Donnell hadn't pulled them aside for pep talks. Bizarrely, a scene that replicates the famous from-behind photograph of Kennedy leaning heavily on a table ends with O'Donnell handing him a drink.

The problem with all this is that everyone involved, including the author of *The Kennedy Tapes*, the book on which the film is based, agrees that O'Donnell had nothing to do with the Missile Crisis (Nelson, M.). He simply was not a factor in any of the decision-making during the crucial two weeks. Of course, Kennedy had advisors who helped him reach his decisions that October; but the movie, by creating this fictionalized character, put its status as accurate history in doubt. It is entertainment, but how much is it history? There's no way to tell, unless the viewer also becomes a reader and goes back to the original sources. Yet, high school students are being shown this movie as history year after year. Perhaps in some of those classes a discussion about the accuracy of the film industry is conducted. In too many, however, even a rudimentary discussion along those lines is bypassed, and students are left with the impression that what they see on the screen is the way it happened.

In *Failsafe*, a fictional president must deal with a nuclear threat caused by an unintended US attack on the Soviet Union. Henry Fonda, as president, spends the entire movie in a White House bunker with few staff, but a lot of phone time. This is an intellectual president, a chess player moving his pieces. He is the antithesis of the man of action: calmly weighing options, sending out orders, letting other people run the risks.

His leadership and decision-making ability, however, are never in doubt. In the end, to avoid an all-out nuclear war, he orders an atomic strike on New York as self-retribution for the unplanned bombing of Moscow. The desperate gambit works, and the Soviets agree not to escalate into a general nuclear war. Made during the Cold War, the movie offers a chilling look at a leader caught in a classic no-win scenario. Fonda creates a character easy to admire. One reviewer said of his handling of the crisis, "Henry Fonda as the President gives one of those portrayals that makes you wish he really were President" (Maxwell).

This is a common sentiment about many of the movie and television portrayals of the presidency: that the person on the screen would be a better choice than the person actually in the White House. As mentioned above, the American public strongly felt this way about Jed Bartlett, preferring him to either of the two major party choices in 2000. This puts a tremendous amount of pressure on the actual president. Not only will people judge his actions during a crisis, but they have popular templates to judge by. During *The West Wing* story arc in which the President's daughter is kidnapped by terrorists, Bartlett demonstrates again why people would want him in the actual White House. Recognizing that he could not make clear decisions with his daughter in danger, he utilized the 25<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution and temporarily stepped aside, relinquishing power. He did this even though, because the Vice President's office was vacant, he would be turning the power of the presidency over to the Speaker of the House, an outspoken Republican and critic of the Bartlett administration. He placed what was good for the country above his own ambition and above party politics. Since it is hard for most people to imagine any president doing that in real life, it was all the more powerful an image to see it done by a popular actor on a hit television show.

*The West Wing*, in fact, was especially powerful in creating expectations in the minds of the American electorate. It was an Emmy-winning critical and commercial success which brought together a tremendously talented ensemble cast, and, for most of its run, some of the best writing

on television. As a liberal Democrat, Bartlett was a welcome change to many people who saw the current political administration as a negative. Those same people embraced the idea of a Nobel Prize winner in economics as a resident of the White House. Martin Sheen's Bartlett was an anti-Bush, someone created as a polar opposite. Powerfully acted, with well-written scripts, he provided an obvious counterpoint to the real administration. The look into the hive of activity that is the West Wing of the White House was so compelling, in fact, that the News Hour with Jim Lehrer ran a special report in October of 2000, comparing the show's handling of issues with that of the actual government. They found that the writers on the show did a better job explaining several current issues than the elected representatives had done (Smith, T.). Even as conservatives complained about the show, viewers of other political stripes welcomed the weekly episodes, almost as if, in the words of one of my teaching colleagues, they were "watching real life in a different – and better – reality."

A different category of presidential imagery comes from comedy. Like all major aspects of American life, the government is a common target of comedy writers of all kinds. Romantic comedies like *Dave* or *The American President* humanize the chief executive and allow the audience to identify – "see, he's just looking for love like everyone else." There have also been television situation comedies. The 1980s gave us the short-lived *Mr. President* or even shorter-lived *Hail to the Chief* (with Patty Duke as the first female President with philandering husband and a wacky gay Secret Service agent) (Nelson, C. 74).

The most powerful comedic iconography, though, undoubtedly comes from satirical sketch comedy programs, such as *Saturday Night Live*. From the start (when it was called *NBC's Saturday Night*), the program took aim at the President as the most visible symbol of American society. From Chevy Chase's bumbling Gerald Ford falling over everything, to Dan Ackroyd's Jimmy Carter growing into a giant after being exposed to Three Mile Island, Phil Hartman's Ronald Reagan who secretly was a workaholic, up through Will Ferrell's George W. Bush, the *SNL* presidential pantheon has created some of the most recognizable political satire of the past thirty years. These imitations again humanize the president, allowing the American people to bring down to their level the most powerful man on the planet. For exactly the same reason, Aristophanes tweaked the Athenian middle class, the Assembly, and Athenian society in general 2500 years ago. Political satire has a long and proud history.

In fact, such teasing of political and governmental leadership is one of the key elements of a free society (Harris). It is no accident that Aristophanes came from Athens and that other great historical satirist Jonathan Swift was British. The ability to challenge and make fun of public figures is taken for granted in free societies, yet often it is banned or even dangerous to attempt in unfree ones. As I write this, Burmese writer and social critic Zarganar is in jail in Myanmar after being arrested by the military junta ("Prominent Regime Critic"). Dictatorial regimes all too frequently view any criticism as an attack upon their authority and as a threat to the maintenance of their power. Writers in many parts of the world risk their status, their liberty, and even their lives if they aim too close to the halls of government. It is important that citizens in free societies remember the costs of such freedoms and remember as well not to take them for granted.

In a sense, those dictators who fear political satire are right to be afraid. The impact of such writing can be widespread. As an example, we need look no farther than the Chevy Chase imitation of Gerald Ford mentioned above. President Ford had been a college football player at the University of Michigan and served in the navy in World War II. He had always been an active and fairly athletic man, continuing to play golf, for example, almost to the end of his life. His public image, however, was altered by *Saturday Night Live* and Chevy Chase in 1975. Keying on two incidents caught on camera when the President stumbled while getting off of a plane, and two other incidents in which Ford hit spectators with errant golf shots, Chase began playing the President as a clumsy bumbler. His trademark was a tremendous pratfall, coming with no warning

and no apparent cause, shortly after introducing himself as President Gerald Ford. As the show took off in popularity, Chase's stumbling chief executive became ensconced in the public mind. Many historians consider it a factor in Ford's election loss to Jimmy Carter in 1976 (Greenfield).

Currently, other sketch programs, such as *Mad TV* and the *Frank Calliendo Show*, follow *SNL*'s model for political comedy. Arguably the most influential political satire for the past few years, though, is Comedy Central's *Daily Show with John Stewart*. Promoting itself as a "fake news show," Stewart's show attacks both political parties and the media without mercy. The nightly program is especially popular with young people. A Pew Trust poll in 2004 showed that 21 percent of people under 30 said that they got their election news from *The Daily Show*, while only 23 percent mentioned network news programs (Young America). Comedy makes complex issues accessible to these young, inexperienced viewers, and as a result, this television program has the power to shape voters' perception. To quote CNN, "One newspaper, *Newsday*, has Stewart listed atop a list of the 20 media players who will most influence the upcoming campaign" ("Young America"). This is quite an indicator of the power of visual media to sway public opinion. Even more notable, the writers and talent from the program make no bones about the fact that they are not real journalists. Yet the medium becomes the message, and viewers absorb it all.

Movies and television present a picture of the presidency that does not need to be grounded in reality or to follow any rules outside of the writers' and directors' imaginations. Unlike reading, where the imagery of the subject matter is created in our minds by our interpretation of the work, video gives us what looks like a complete picture, one whereby we have the character development and action demonstrated for us; we do not have to think much about them. Video representations of the president are easier to internalize, and, consciously or not, we tend to compare our leaders with those we have seen on our favorite TV shows or in movies. Thus, those representations help shape our image of who we want the president to be.

Sometimes the effects are even more marked and more overt. In 1976, the movie *All the President's Men* was released during the presidential election. The wounds of the Watergate scandal were fresh and deep, as was the dissatisfaction with many voters over President Ford's pardon of Richard Nixon. The film, which was a critical and box office hit, brought the entirety of the scandal back into the spotlight. What kind of impact did it have? As film critic Emanuel Levy says, no less an authority than Ronald Reagan argued that the movie cost the Republicans the election.

With all of this evidence that Hollywood productions influence voters' thinking and behavior, it is absolutely vital that government classes address the process of developing such perceptions. Our students will be inundated by imagery and information. Even if they are not particularly interested in politics, they will still be affected by the opinions of friends, family, coworkers, and the like. The students deserve to acquire the tools to allow them to analyze opinions, news, and other data, and to think independently in line with their own values and goals. At the very least, they should learn what questions to ask to begin to be able to think for themselves. In order to do so, they need practice. Such is the purpose of this unit, with the goal of producing active and informed citizens who can positively impact their society.

## **Movies**

Before this unit begins, the government classes will have examined the constitutional authority of the presidency and how the office has evolved since 1789. We will pay particular attention to the advent of the so-called "Imperial Presidency" in the 1930s and the growing power of the executive branch through the rest of the twentieth century. The students should be well grounded in the theoretical aspects of the office.

The students will then choose two films to watch, one from each of the groups below (of course, other movies may be added or substituted as you require):

**Group A:** *All the President's Men*; *13 Days*; *Nixon*; *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*; *JFK*; *The Missiles of October*; *Wilson*; *Give 'Em Hell, Harry*; *PT-109*; *Dick*

**Group B:** *Dave*, *Primary Colors*; *Wag the Dog*, *Air Force One*, *Independence Day*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *Failsafe*, *The American President*, *The West Wing* (series pilot), *Commander-in-Chief* (series pilot), *24* (Season 1, episodes 1 and 2)

The students will be responsible for viewing their selected films on their own, although I will arrange one screening of *All the President's Men* and one of *The West Wing* pilot on separate days after school. During viewing of the films in Group A, they will take notes, following three criteria: powers the president demonstrates, the image of the president as portrayed, and questions of accuracy. In the first case, they will be watching for the ways in which the movie president functions, including what he does and how he does it. In the second, the students will analyze how the film-makers wanted the presidential character to appear to the audience. Is he decisive and strong, for example, or corrupt and weak? Finally, the third category of notes will be specifically for later research, to check on the accuracy of the film with regard to the actual events depicted. Notes for the Group B films will follow the same lines, except that, since those works are wholly fiction, only the first two categories of notes will be taken. See the appendix for the Notes forms.

## LESSON PLANS

### Lesson 1: Introduction to the Perception of the Presidency

**Objectives:** The students will understand the roles played by the media in the U.S. political system. (3A)

The students will understand the structure and functions of the government created by the U.S. Constitution. (9)

The students will analyze the factors that influence an individual's political attitudes and actions. (16C)

The students will compare and evaluate characteristics, style, and effectiveness of state and national leaders, past and present. (16D)

**Materials:** There are no particular materials needed by the teacher for this lesson.

**Procedures:** This lesson will be the introduction to the curriculum unit for the students. The purpose is to start the students thinking about their own concept of what traits a good president should have, and also thinking about the common perceptions of the current President. The class should open with a writing opportunity. The students should brainstorm for a minute or two and then write briefly (approximately 10 minutes) about what qualities the leader of the US government should demonstrate. After you call time for the writing portion, the students should break into small groups of 3 or 4 to discuss what qualities they came up with and why they think those things are important. (I organize my students into "committees" at the beginning of the semester, so their movement into these groups is frequent and therefore usually goes relatively smoothly with the least wasted time.)

Then, staying in their small groups, they should discuss their perception of the current President, with the additional goal of answering the following questions as a group: a) Does their group have the same perception as the majority of the country? What is their evidence for their answer?



b) Where do they gather data in developing their perceptions? What aspects of popular culture, news reporting, etc. go into creating their viewpoints?

**Assessment:** The individuals will turn in their original short writing piece, and the groups will turn in the second assignment. As the opening lesson in the unit, and as an opinion piece, this assignment should be a holistic daily grade, assessed for completion and for evidence of thought process.

## **Lesson 2: The Impact of Political Satire**

**Objectives:** The students will understand the roles played by the media in the U.S. political system. (3A)

The students will understand the structure and functions of the government created by the U.S. Constitution. (9)

The students will analyze the factors that influence an individual's political attitudes and actions. (16C)

The students will compare and evaluate characteristics, style, and effectiveness of state and national leaders, past and present. (16D)

**Materials:** The teacher will need to rent or buy three DVDs of the *Best of Saturday Night*

*Live:* the Chevy Chase, Phil Hartman, and Dana Carvey episodes. These are readily available from Netflix or Blockbuster, or some similar outlet.

**Procedures:** This lesson will act as a dry run for the viewing of the films later. In class, we will show three sketches from *Saturday Night Live*: Chevy Chase doing Gerald Ford, a Phil Hartman as Ronald Reagan sketch, and a Dana Carvey as George H. W. Bush sketch. As they watch, the students will write down their views of the sketch itself and to try to identify what, if any, impact such sketches might have on the attitudes of the electorate toward the person being portrayed. The students will be asked to evaluate that impact of the portrayal of the presidents on public perception. Once the videos are over, they should break briefly into their small groups to share their findings.

Then give the students this scenario: A President with relatively low approval ratings is running for reelection against a strong challenger. It appears that the election will be very close. Then ask the students to write an answer to this question: Would a series of sketches such as we have seen have any significant effect on the election? Would people alter their voting behavior because of a comedy routine on SNL? Pick the Chase sketch as if at random as an example. Allow them time to write their expectations about this situation. Once everyone is done, briefly allow them to share; then inform them that many historians do think that Chase's bumbling Ford impression did have an impact and helped lead to his defeat by Jimmy Carter.

**Assessment:** The expectations for this assignment should represent a step upward from the previous one. Simple completion and evidence of effort should no longer receive full points. Since at this point in the semester the class has looked at the Office of the Presidency and at least a partial examination of elections and voting behavior, then the students should be able to analyze the situation somewhat more successfully. Therefore, to get full points, the students must identify that there would be an impact and at least rudimentarily explain why.

## **Lesson 3: Information Gathering and Opinion Polling**

**Objectives:** The students will create a product on a contemporary government issue or topic using critical methods of inquiry. (21B)

The students will analyze and evaluate the validity of information from primary and

secondary sources for bias, propaganda, point of view, and frame of reference.(21D)

The students will analyze the factors that influence an individual's political attitudes and actions. (16C)

The students will compare and evaluate characteristics, style, and effectiveness of state and national leaders, past and present. (16D)

**Materials:** Copies of a recent opinion poll from a major news source. Also, you might want to bring in the famous photograph of Harry Truman holding up the “Dewey Beats Truman” *Chicago Tribune* and have a discussion about how that went so wrong.

**Procedures:** The students should have been introduced to opinion polling in class before now. If not, then the first part of the class should be a brief discussion of polling, techniques of a successful poll, and data collation. Show the students the latest opinion poll for an upcoming election, or just for the President’s approval rating. These are readily available on the Internet.

Then the students should move into their small groups. Their assignment is to create an opinion poll about individual’s perception of the current President of the United States. Their goals are two-fold: first, to find out how people feel about the President and the job he is doing. Second, they want to start identifying the sources of their subject’s opinions. As such, they will need two distinctive sets of questions. Three to five (or more) questions should be developed to divine the opinions themselves. Then a further three to five should be written to try to distinguish where those opinions have come from. Do the subjects watch the news regularly? Listen to talk radio? Watch movies or television shows about the President?

Once they have created the poll, they are to give it to at least 14 people. Seven should be their peers, with no two groups polling the same students. The other seven should be adults, again with no duplication and the further constraint that no more than one can be a family member. After giving the poll, then they must collate the data and present it in an easy format, broken down by answers given, and age group of respondent. This will take a significant amount of time, so make sure you give this assignment at the latest in the middle of the second grading period.

**Assessment:** The teacher should develop a rubric that responds to the individual situation of his or her class. The grade should be given for two parts, the creation of the poll itself and the collation and presentation of data. In my class, the differing levels of work involved in making three, four or five question segments make up the bulk of the grade difference. In general, three question segments (one for opinion and one for information sources) receive a C, while five question ones receive an A, assuming, of course, that all instructions were followed and the assignment was completed successfully.

#### **Lesson 4: The Culminating Assessment**

**45 minutes + OS**

**Objectives:** The student will understand the roles played by the media in the U.S. political system. (3A)

The student will understand the structure and functions of the government created by the U.S. Constitution. (9)

The student will analyze the structure and functions of the executive branch of government, including the constitutional powers of the president.

The student will analyze the factors that influence an individual's political attitudes and actions. (16C)

The student will compare and evaluate characteristics, style, and effectiveness of state and national leaders, past and present. (16D)

The student will express and defend a point of view on an issue of contemporary interest in the United States. (17C)

The student will create a product on a contemporary government issue or topic using critical methods of inquiry. (21B)

**Materials:** The students will have watched their two movies by this time. There are no particular materials needed from the teacher.

**Procedures:** It is extremely important that you remind the students throughout the semester that they need to rent and watch the movies they have chosen. The typical adolescent will put it off until the last minute, but the goal of this unit is critical thought and depth of inquiry; therefore, they will need time to digest and analyze. This lesson comes in several parts. First, allow the students to share in general class discussion their impressions of the movies that they watched. It is important that the exchange remain on the aspects of the presidency demonstrated, and not devolve into side issues, so you will have to monitor this discussion closely.

Second, the students should go into small groups to put together a “video guide” to the movies seen by the group. This should have the basic information about the movies (release date, studio, director, performers, etc.) and a brief synopsis, with a short “thumbs up or thumbs down” review with a brief explanation.

Third, each student should do two things individually with the movie data they have gathered. Each should write an opinion piece analyzing what, if any, impact the movies he or she saw would have on a typical voter who might see it during an election year. Finally, each student should do the following:

Scenario: In a year of a close election, a movie comes out in the summer that depicts a marginally “fictionalized” President (use *Primary Colors* as an example) who does some underhanded or downright horrible things. What would we expect the impact of such a movie to be? Write a detailed plan in which a typical voter could, with the resources available to him or her, analyze the movie and form a proper response. Remember, the movie is just a piece of entertainment. How would an average person want to respond in order to demonstrate independent thinking and a resistance to manipulation from the movie-makers? This should be in the form of a coherent, cogent essay and should demonstrate growth from the first lesson at the beginning of the semester.

**Assessment:** Again, the teacher should develop rubrics that are appropriate to his or her own classroom situation and goals for the lesson. This has been a semester-long assignment, encompassing numerous hours of work in and out of class. Therefore, this is a major grade. The rubric should reflect all the possible facets of growth that the class has examined. My rubric tends to award higher levels of points to more analytical responses, and fewer points are awarded to grammar, usage and the like. However, it is important that each teacher create a scale that works best in his or her own situation.

## APPENDIX A

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Government: Film Notes

Film \_\_\_\_\_

Date of release: \_\_\_\_\_

Director: \_\_\_\_\_

Studio: \_\_\_\_\_

**Take notes with as much detail as possible on the following questions. Attach additional pages as needed. Use this form for Group A films.**

Category 1 – What are the powers the President wields in the movie? How are these powers depicted?

Category 2 – How is the character of the President depicted? What traits does the President demonstrate?

Category 3 – What happens in the movie that might be inaccurate? What do you need to check on later?

## **APPENDIX B**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

### **Government: Film Notes**

Film \_\_\_\_\_

Date of release: \_\_\_\_\_

Director: \_\_\_\_\_

Studio: \_\_\_\_\_

**Take notes with as much detail as possible on the following questions. Attach additional pages as needed. Use this form for Group B films.**

Category 1 – What are the powers the President wields in the movie? How are these powers depicted?

Category 2 – How is the character of the President depicted? What traits does the President demonstrate?

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