

HANDOUT TWO:

Film Clip Transcript

ANNOUNCER:

It is not unexpected that in these politically tumultuous times we scrutinize our past in order to understand the present.

JON MEACHAM:

Hey, how are you? Good to see you. Jon Meacham.

B-ROLL: Rows of empty seats; view of stage in empty assembly hall; Jon Meacham waits backstage.

ANNOUNCER:

Tonight's speaker has established himself as one of the most reasoned and enlightened voices wielding the literary scalpel examining history

B-ROLL: View of auditorium filled with people.

ANNOUNCER:

Ladies and gentlemen, please give a warm welcome to Jon Meacham.

VERITE:

Meacham walks onto stage; views of crowd applauding; WS Meacham at podium; views of audience listening; MS Meacham at podium

JON MEACHAM:

Thank you. So we're living in an era of politics as entertainment. Politics as an unfolding and insistent drama. And so the question I get asked the most is, is has it ever been like this? Second question is, how do we get out of this? And so I'd like to take our few minutes this afternoon to talk about some moments that I think should give us a sense of proportion about the questions of the present time. Because we have been here before. If we had been here 101 years ago today [1919], what would have been going on?

B-ROLL: B/W footage of White House; Woodrow Wilson at his desk; soldiers rushing out of a trench, charging into battle, artillery firing.

JON MEACHAM:

Woodrow Wilson would be President of the United States. We would be fighting the First World War with a huge part of the country wondering why our boys were going to fight for nations about whom we knew so little.

HEADLINE: "REDS IN U.S. PLOTTED REVOLUTION; DEPORTATION OF ALL RADICALS"

B-ROLL: B/W footage of men protesting holding signs; soldiers with rifles; rioting; White House exterior; Woodrow Wilson on telephone.

JON MEACHAM:

In 1919, 1920, you had a prevalent fear that radical, socialist, communists were taking the country away. Woodrow Wilson cracked down on civil dissent and civil liberties.

HEADLINE: "PALMER PLEDGES WAR ON RADICALS"

B-ROLL: Palmer raids, police dragging people out of homes.

JON MEACHAM:

A. Mitchell Palmer, the Attorney General launches a number of raids on suspected dissidents. President Wilson closes down four hundred newspapers.

HEADLINE: "400 Newspapers Are Suppressed And Many Editors Sent To Jail"

STILLS: Immigrants of East Asian descent with suitcases and behind bars

HEADLINE: "Immigration Bill Is Signed By President"; "Alien Quotas of 2 Per Cent. Based on the 1890 Census Go Into Effect on July 1"

JON MEACHAM:

Immigration was at an extraordinary high. It didn't really stop until the 1924 immigration legislation, which put quotas on immigration from different countries.

B-ROLL: Klan members riding on horses, crowd of onlookers on either side; close-up of Klan members walking; large number of Klan members at a gathering burning a large effigy; Klan march in Washington, D.C.

JON MEACHAM:

There was white anxiety about cultural identity, about economic opportunity, that inspired the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. It was a terrorist organization that was devoted to white supremacy. In 1925 and '26, 50,000 Klansmen marched down Pennsylvania Avenue in what was a remarkable but not stunning public display.

STILL: Photos of Klansmen in the march.

JON MEACHAM:

It was a big, broad-based racist army. And what they wanted to do was make America great again.

STILL: Photo of Georgia Governor Clifford Walker.

B-ROLL: Large steel slab being lifted up.

JON MEACHAM:

The Governor of Georgia announced that he wanted to build a wall of steel as high as heaven to keep immigrants out. Huh.

As Mark Twain once said, "History may not repeat itself, but it does rhyme." Nativism, xenophobia, racism, sexism, isolationism are perennial American forces. They ebb and they flow.

STILLS: Blacks picking cotton in a cotton field; lynching still; illustration of white league and KKK member holding hands over black people huddled over; Statue of Liberty emerges from clouds of steam; young white people holding confederate flag; Klansmen at a gathering holding a burning cross; white man overseeing black prisoners digging with shovels; young black prisoner tied up around a pole; Klansmen demonstrating, holding picket signs

JON MEACHAM:

The story of race and fear and anxiety and violence is inextricably intertwined with the story of the country. It's not that the country has been captured by a particular group at a particular time. The soul of the country is in fact this essence, which is not all good or all bad. You have your better angels fighting against your worst impulses. And that has a religious component, certainly. It's also, though, a matter of historical observation. Our history is shaped by the extent to which those better angels or those worst instincts win out in a given period of time.