

HANDOUT ONE:

Excerpts of Jon Meacham Speech

[Meacham, Jon. "Keynote Address", 13 September, 2019, Four Seasons Hotel, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum in Boston, MA.]

"I have voted for Republicans, I have voted for Democrats. . . . I'm coming at you from spending an immense amount of time thinking about the American past, and what light it might actually shed on the present, and possibly the future. Because we don't look back enough, and when we look back we look back in the wrong way. We look back nostalgically. We look back and think things were simpler, things were easier. "Make America great again," what was he [Donald Trump saying? He was saying make America like 1956 again, and if you were me, if you were a boringly heterosexual white Southern Protestant man, 1956 is fine, I'd be all in. If you were a woman, if you were a person of color, if you were of a different sexual identity, not so great. This is the story of American life, and this is not liberal, and not conservative, it's not Republican, it's not Democrat.

The story of the country from Lexington and Concord, to the Battle of New Orleans, to Appomattox, to Seneca Falls, to Stonewall, to Selma, is about the values that brought you into this room and into this life. It's about projecting a vision of American liberty that leads to strength and American greatness, and without liberty there is no greatness.

So let's walk through this, let's test this. . . . 100 years ago, 101 years ago if we had been here what would be going on? 1918, 1919, Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States, would have just resegregated the federal government, would have signed the Sedition Act, after which he closed down 400 newspapers and magazines with which he disagreed. . . . The Ku Klux Klan was refounded on the Saturday after Thanksgiving in 1915 at Stone Mountain, Georgia, because of anxiety about immigrants, who were coming in and had the audacity to work harder for less money than the white working class that was in place. . . . The 1924 Democratic National Convention went to 103 ballots because there were 347 clan delegates at Madison Square Garden who would not vote for Al Smith because he was Irish Catholic.

Two to six million Americans joined the KKK across America. . . . There were six United States senators, 30 members of the House of Representatives who were openly members of the Klan. Hugo Black [Associate Supreme Court Justice] was a member of the KKK. Robert

Byrd [U.S. Senator from West Virginia] was a member of the KKK. The only reason [future president] Harry Truman didn't join is because he didn't really understand the Catholic part, and he had a bunch of Catholic friends that he wanted to give jobs to.

There, but for that moment Roosevelt couldn't have put him on the ticket in '44 because the only reason Truman was in line to be on the ticket is because FDR couldn't put Jimmy Burns on the ticket because Jimmy Burns was on the segregated slate in South Carolina. No Truman, maybe no Marshall Plan, no Marshall Plan maybe no containment, no containment maybe no NATO, and

the entire post-war era that was so effectively run by men like Dwight Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan and George Herbert Walker Bush, and produced 30 years ago in November, [November 9, 1989] the fall of the most vivid symbol, [the Berlin Wall] the deadliest standoff in human history maybe didn't happen. History turns on these things, it's contingent, it's conditional, and that should give us immense hope, because it means that our own era will turn on contingencies and conditions.

And sometimes one person's decision ripples across everything. December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks doesn't get up, Martin Luther King proves the Napoleonic adage that geography is destiny. The reason we know Martin Luther King is because his church at Dexter Avenue was closest to downtown. The bus boycott required an immense amount of organization. The leadership of that was worried that if they pushed out to a more suburban church people wouldn't come, so they went to King and said, "We want to use your church." King is quoted as saying, "I don't really want to go, but they're using my church"; and now, in perhaps the most American piece of real estate, Martin Luther King stares at Thomas Jefferson across the Tidal Basin. Is there anything more American than that tension?"

- What are your reactions to Jon Meacham's historical argument about our past and our present times? What sentence stands out?
- If Jon Meacham were in the room, what question would you ask him in relation to this speech?