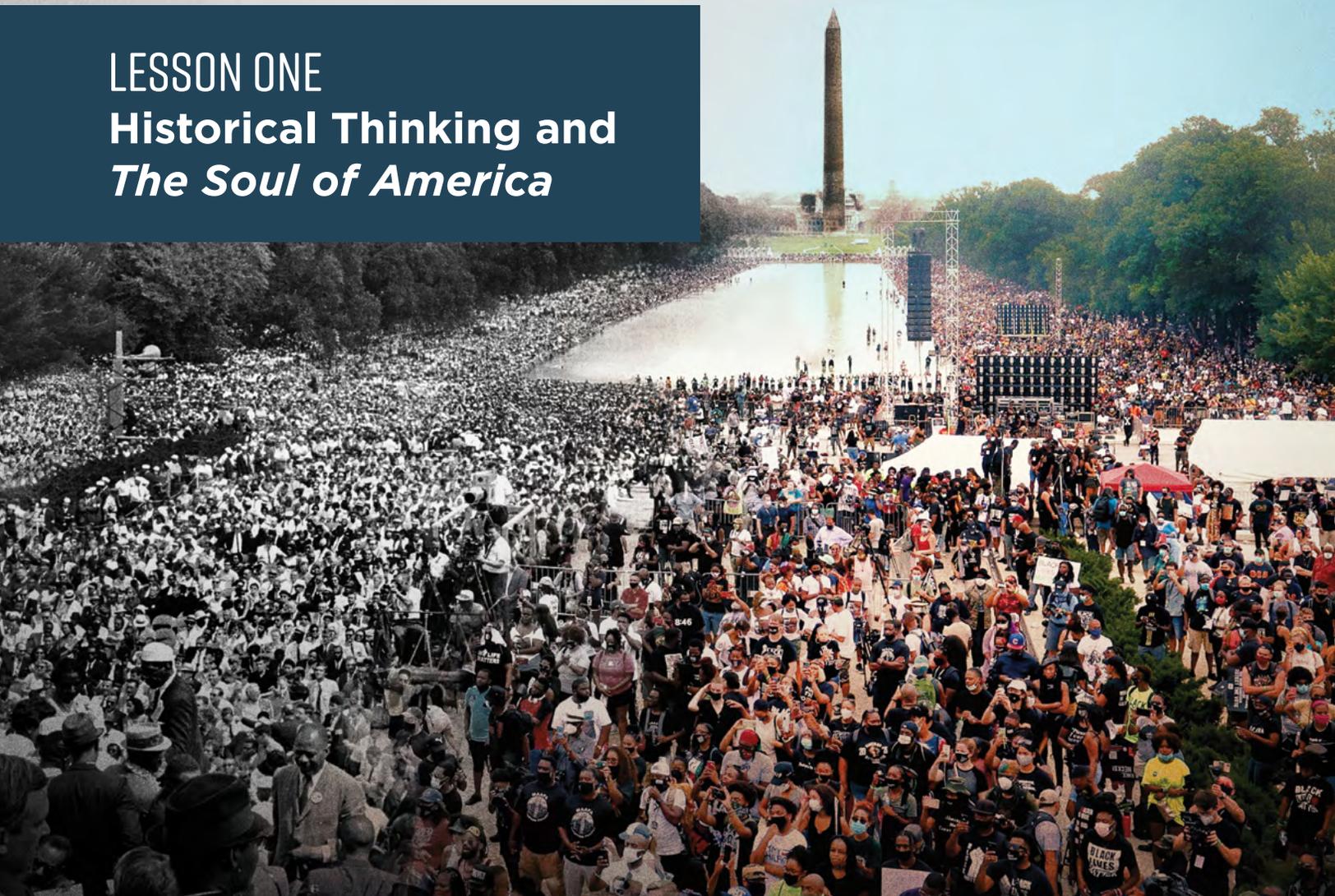


# THE SOUL OF AMERICA

KNOW OUR PAST.  
SHAPE OUR FUTURE.

LESSON ONE  
**Historical Thinking and**  
*The Soul of America*



# TEACHING *THE SOUL* *OF AMERICA*

Many generations, including our own, feel that the conflicts and challenges of their time are unique, even unprecedented. Yet, when we study the history of the United States we see many other periods fraught with divisiveness and tension. Shining a light on these critical moments can be instructive and offer students new insights about who we are as a nation, where we have fallen short of our democratic ideals, and how the civic engagement and morality of leaders—from journalists to activists to our president—can guide us all towards a more equitable and inclusive future.

The documentary **THE SOUL OF AMERICA** shares case studies from our nation's history through the point of view of historian Jon Meacham, a contemporary historian of American US politics, presidents, and other topics in American studies. In his talks across the country, his frequent appearances on television, and his writing, Meacham explains that two opposing forces cause tension and division—our worst instincts—nativism, racism, sexism, isolationism, and xenophobia—and the better angels of our nature—those qualities and actions that lead our nation to flourish and thrive as a pluralistic democratic republic.



## JON MEACHAM EXPLAINS:

“IN THE BEST OF MOMENTS, WITNESS, PROTEST, AND RESISTANCE CAN INTERSECT WITH THE LEADERSHIP OF AN AMERICAN PRESIDENT TO LIFT US TO HIGHER GROUND. IN DARKER TIMES, IF A PARTICULAR PRESIDENT FAILS TO ADVANCE THE NATIONAL STORY—OR WORSE, MOVE US BACKWARDS—THEN THOSE WHO WITNESS, PROTEST, AND RESIST MUST STAND FAST, IN HOPE, WORKING TOWARD A BETTER DAY. PROGRESS IN AMERICAN LIFE, AS WE WILL SEE, HAS BEEN SLOW, PAINFUL, BLOODY, AND TRAGIC. ACROSS TOO MANY GENERATIONS, WOMEN, AFRICAN AMERICANS, IMMIGRANTS, AND OTHERS HAVE BEEN DENIED THE FULL PROMISE OF THOMAS JEFFERSON’S DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE. YET THE JOURNEY HAS GONE ON, AND PROCEEDS EVEN NOW.”

# OVERVIEW

## Essential Questions

- What is history?
- What are the elements of historical thinking?
- What factors, and which voices, shape historical narratives?
- How does our current moment shape our historical perspective?

In August 2017 hundreds of far-right extremists gathered in Charlottesville, Virginia to purportedly protest the removal of the statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee from a park. Counter protests followed resulting in the death of Heather Heyer, killed by James Fields, an avowed white supremacist, who drove his car through the crowd. After the events in Charlottesville, historian Jon Meacham was enlisted by *Time* magazine to write about the history of hate in America. What emerged was the article “American Hate: A History,” and then a book and documentary film, both called **THE SOUL OF AMERICA**. In each of these works, Meacham puts forth a historical argument that offers insights and lessons to reflect upon during our current, divided times.

In this lesson students will explore the elements of historical thinking, identify what is and is not historical evidence, and examine the construction of a historical argument through understanding Meacham’s premise of the “soul of America”.

## Objectives

Students will:

- Examine and discuss “What is history?” and “What is historical evidence?”
- Understand the construction of a historical argument and a historical narrative
- Articulate what historian Jon Meacham argues is the soul of America

## Length

Two 55-minute class periods

## Materials

- Equipment to screen the video segment for this lesson
- Clip from **THE SOUL OF AMERICA**: 1:03:19 - 1:07:41 (4:22 mins)
- Copies of Handouts:
  - One: Jon Meacham Speech, Four Seasons Hotel
  - Two: Lesson One, Film transcript
  - Three: Analyzing Historical Photographs
  - Four: Reflective Writing

# ACTIVITY: DAY ONE

## THE ELEMENTS OF HISTORICAL THINKING IN THE *SOUL OF AMERICA*

Explain to students that over the course of this unit they will:

- Expand their knowledge of U.S. history
- Learn about the work of historian Jon Meacham
- Strengthen media literacy skills by watching documentary film and interview clips from **THE SOUL OF AMERICA**

Explore different aspects of historical thinking skills, such as:

- Examining the construction of a historical argument and a historical narrative
- Exploring the same historical event through multiple historians' points of view
- Analyzing different source materials to evaluate if they provide applicable historical evidence



### Opening

1 Invite students to interview one another in several rapid rounds of questioning. Students should take notes and be prepared to share their answers with each other.

- What is history?
- What is historical evidence?
- What is a historical argument?
- What is a historical narrative?



2 Transition to posting these true/false statements (*Project, post in a shared online classroom, or if possible, create an online poll using a Google form*)

- History is an account of the past. **T/F**
- Accounts of history differ depending on one's perspective. **T/F**
- We rely on evidence to construct accounts of the past. **T/F**
- We must question the reliability of each piece of evidence. **T/F**
- All evidence is equal when constructing accounts of the past. **T/F**
- Any single piece of evidence is insufficient to build a plausible account of a historical event, individual, movement, or era. **T/F**
- We rely on evidence to construct accounts of the past. **T/F**
- We must question the reliability of each piece of evidence. **T/F**
- All evidence is equal when constructing accounts of the past. **T/F**
- Any single piece of evidence is insufficient to build a plausible account of a historical event, individual, movement, or era. **T/F**

3 Summarize for students these foundational ideas for the study of history:

- Historians look at the past, use evidence to argue how ideas or events unfolded, and help us understand why they occurred.
- Hard evidence is necessary to present an argument.
- We understand that history is constructed. It's a narrative built by historians.
- Creating an argument based on reliable evidence is one way to ensure more objective understandings of the past.



4 Transition from this overview to introducing Jon Meacham a contemporary historian of American politics, presidents, and other topics in American studies, by sharing portions of a keynote speech he delivered.

- What do students learn about Jon Meacham from the **Handout One: Jon Meacham Speech, Four Seasons Hotel?** Creating an argument based on reliable evidence is one way to ensure more objective understandings of the past.

**Teacher Note:** For students interested in learning more about Jon Meacham, see the biographical snapshot in the Screening Guide for **THE SOUL OF AMERICA**.



## Identify the Argument

Next, dig a bit deeper into Jon Meacham’s perspective by sharing a short film clip from the beginning of the documentary **THE SOUL OF AMERICA**. Explain to students that after watching the film you will be distributing a written transcript of the excerpt for a pair/share exercise.

### 1 Watch film clip

Share this film excerpt from the documentary **THE SOUL OF AMERICA** - 1:03:19 - 1:07:19:18 (4:22 mins)

*Begins: “It is not unexpected that in these politically tumultuous times ...”*

*Ends: “It was true in the (decades), and it’s true today.”*

### 2 Distribute the transcript

Have students work through their ideas in pairs.

- Identify (underline/highlight) what they understand as Jon Meacham’s argument about the soul of America.
- In their own words, describe their understanding of the soul of America.



- Discuss the dueling forces of struggle and aspiration or hope within the idea of the soul of America.
- Choose a spokesperson to summarize your idea of the soul of America and the role of struggle and hope for the class.



### **Closing: Class Discussion**

Have students return to a full class. Ask spokespeople to share a summary of their understanding of what comprises the soul of America and where the role of struggle and feeling of hope fits into their idea.

#### **JON MEACHAM EXPLAINS:**

“IN THE BEST OF MOMENTS, WITNESS, PROTEST, AND RESISTANCE CAN INTERSECT WITH THE LEADERSHIP OF AN AMERICAN PRESIDENT TO LIFT US TO HIGHER GROUND. IN DARKER TIMES, IF A PARTICULAR PRESIDENT FAILS TO ADVANCE THE NATIONAL STORY—OR WORSE, MOVE US BACKWARDS—THEN THOSE WHO WITNESS, PROTEST, AND RESIST MUST STAND FAST, IN HOPE, WORKING TOWARD A BETTER DAY. PROGRESS IN AMERICAN LIFE, AS WE WILL SEE, HAS BEEN SLOW, PAINFUL, BLOODY, AND TRAGIC. ACROSS TOO MANY GENERATIONS, WOMEN, AFRICAN AMERICANS, IMMIGRANTS, AND OTHERS HAVE BEEN DENIED THE FULL PROMISE OF THOMAS JEFFERSON’S DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE. YET THE JOURNEY HAS GONE ON, AND PROCEEDS EVEN NOW.”

# ACTIVITY: DAY TWO

## → Opening

Ask students to brainstorm examples of useful historical evidence making sure that personal testimony, journals, newspapers and photographs, are included in their list.

Share that in these lessons they will be practicing analysis skills to evaluate the value, credibility, and use of different pieces of historical evidence. Likely, photographs will be mentioned as one example. Explain that with technological advances such as Photoshop so accessible, altering images has become easier and more widespread making it important for students to examine their veracity when choosing one as historical evidence to support an argument.

While not included within the scope of these lessons, this evaluative exercise can tie to previous or future examinations on the subjectivity of history and historical evidence.

## → Analyzing Historical Evidence: Photographs

- 1 **Ask students:** “When you think about iconic photographs from American history, what comes to mind?”

For example, Jon Meacham claims in the opening film clip, “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.”

**Ask:** How would he know this?

- 2 Discuss what types of evidence an historian would need to analyze in order to claim this march occurred in 1925 and 1926. If necessary, refer to the list of brainstormed examples of useful historical evidence.



## Historical Evidence Questions

- 1 **Ask students:** “What questions does a historian, and do you, need to ask in order for a photograph to be evaluated as a reliable piece of evidence?” Brainstorm together while guiding students to articulate questions in the direction of evidence evaluation. If necessary, fill in with these questions:

- Where and when was the photograph taken?
- Why was the photograph taken?
- Do we know who took the photograph?
- Do we know anything about the context in which the photograph was taken?
- Was the photograph published? Where?
- How may the photograph have been altered? Why is this important to know?

- 2 **Project this image:** <https://www.loc.gov/item/2001706338/> and lead students through the process of evaluation.

**Ask:** Is this one photograph enough evidence to support the claim by Meacham about the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s? What other evidence could support this claim? How is this photograph useful?





## Image Roundtable

1 Once questions are collected and agreed upon, explain that students will now be evaluating a small selection of images from the case studies highlighted in **THE SOUL OF AMERICA**.

Organize students into small groups. Each group will need to:

- Access the images via a shared classroom folder.
- Evaluate each photograph using their questions and the Analyzing Historical Photographs handout.
- Reach consensus on if the photograph is useful as a piece of historical evidence.
- Have a group spokesperson defend the group's decision.



**Image One:** Model the process of image analysis by applying these questions to this photograph without sharing the caption. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017660612/>. Go through the historical evidence questions the class compiled.

**Teacher Note:** This photograph is a good example, as it may appear to be from the Civil War, given the uniforms, but it is not. Share caption: Company B, Confederate Veterans of Nashville, Tennessee, at reunion in Memphis, 1924.



**Image Two:** Women's Suffrage

<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ggbain.13711/> -

Caption: Suffragists on way to Boston between 1910 and 1915



**Image Three:** FDR and Japanese Incarceration

<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2004665381/> - Oakland, Calif., Mar. 1942

Caption: A large sign reading “I am an American” placed in the window of a store, at [401 - 403 Eighth] and Franklin streets, on December 8, the day after Pearl Harbor. The store was closed following orders to persons of Japanese descent to evacuate from certain West Coast areas. The owner, a University of California graduate, will be housed with hundreds of evacuees in War Relocation Authority centers for the duration of the war.



**Image Four:** McCarthy and the Press

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2010646093/>

Caption: A crowded chamber with Gary Cooper testifying before the House Un-American Activities Committee.



**Image Five:** LBJ & MLK

<http://www.lbjlibrary.net/collections/photo-archive/photolab-detail.html?id=1563>

Caption: LBJ meeting with MLK, Whitney Young, and James Farmer in the Oval Office



## **Closing: Reflective Writing**

End class with a reflective writing assignment.

Distribute **Handout - Reflective Writing** and clarify any questions about the assignment.

# 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?

# 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.

# HANDOUT THREE: Analyzing Historical Photographs

## Image Title

Where and when was the photograph taken?

Why was the photograph taken?



Do we know who took the photograph?

Do we know anything about the context in which the photograph was taken?

What kind of camera was used to take the photograph?

How may have the photograph been altered from its original form? Why is this important to know?

## Women's Suffrage

Where and when was the photograph taken?

Why was the photograph taken?



Do we know who took the photograph?

Do we know anything about the context in which the photograph was taken?

What kind of camera was used to take the photograph?

How may have the photograph been altered from its original form? Why is this important to know?

## FDR and Japanese Incarceration

Where and when was the photograph taken?

Why was the photograph taken?



Do we know who took the photograph?

Do we know anything about the context in which the photograph was taken?

What kind of camera was used to take the photograph?

How may have the photograph been altered from its original form? Why is this important to know?

## McCarthy and the Press

Where and when was the photograph taken?

Why was the photograph taken?



Do we know who took the photograph?

Do we know anything about the context in which the photograph was taken?

What kind of camera was used to take the photograph?

How may have the photograph been altered from its original form? Why is this important to know?

## **LBJ & MLK**

Where and when was the photograph taken?

Why was the photograph taken?



Do we know who took the photograph?

Do we know anything about the context in which the photograph was taken?

What kind of camera was used to take the photograph?

How may have the photograph been altered from its original form? Why is this important to know?

## HANDOUT FOUR: Reflective Writing

**Directions:** Read this passage from a Jon Meacham speech in the documentary, and answer the writing prompt:

“NATIVISM, XENOPHOBIA, RACISM, SEXISM, ISOLATIONISM ARE PERENNIAL AMERICAN FORCES. THEY EBB AND THEY FLOW. . . . 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.”

In a one-page typed paper, respond to Meacham’s claim, “Our history is shaped by the extent to which those better angels or those worst instincts win out in a given period of time.” Do you agree or disagree? Support or refute his claim with clear evidence.