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U.S. History Readers

**American Presidents:
Kennedy to Obama**

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Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN: 978-1-56004-505-2

Product Code: ZP477

American Presidents: From Kennedy to Obama

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American Presidents: From John Kennedy to Barack Obama

This book provides teachers with the opportunity to acquaint students with the life stories of the men who have held the highest office in America and to encourage students to make tentative observations about how well these presidents' domestic and foreign policies served the people who elected them. Several themes run through the unit. On the personal side, it asks how each president's early experiences influenced his actions while in office. In domestic policy, it asks if the president followed conservative (supply side) economic policies, and what he did to increase or limit the government's role in the economy. With regard to foreign policy, readers learn that these ten presidents' records vary between vigorously defending American interests and adopting a conciliatory posture that sought first to arrive at peaceful solutions. Students examine American presidents' efforts to engage the Soviet Union in Cuba and Berlin, fight and end the war in Vietnam, confront the challenges of the Middle East, and face the threat of terrorism.

The first chapter informs readers that President John F. Kennedy pursued a vigorous foreign policy that included initiatives such as the Peace Corps and the Alliance for Progress, the invasion of the Bay of Pigs, the blockade of Cuba, and the test-ban treaty with the Soviet Union. Subsequent chapters indicate that Lyndon Johnson generally carried out Kennedy's domestic initiatives, including the War on Poverty. Readers learn that Johnson also made the decisions that engulfed the U.S. in a quagmire from which President Nixon extricated the country only to watch Saigon fall during Gerald Ford's presidency. Students learn how Nixon's domestic policies contained surprisingly liberal initiatives at the same time he adhered to a "Southern strategy." The narrative describes Ford vainly trying to fight inflation with WIN (Whip Inflation Now) buttons and continuing Nixon's foreign policy initiatives with respect to China and the Soviet Union.

The story continues with the largely ineffective presidency of Jimmy Carter, whose only significant accomplishment—helping negotiate the successful peace agreement between Egypt and Israel—was largely ignored by a country experiencing 15 percent inflation, a hostage crisis with Iran, and "malaise." While the latter disappeared with Ronald Reagan's election, the resulting optimism did not succeed in helping balance the budget: a tax cut along with increased military spending led the U.S. to run deficits. However, the increased military spending may have helped to break the Soviet economy and led to surprising concessions from the "evil empire."

The story proceeds with George H. W. Bush allowing a tax increase that helped his successor balance the budget. Readers learn that despite a largely successful U.S. effort in the First Gulf War, Bush lost his bid for reelection. Bill Clinton's foreign policy is portrayed as succeeding in former Yugoslavia, being remiss in Rwanda, and falling short with the Israelis and the Palestinians. Readers learn that George W. Bush bloated the budget by cutting taxes and increasing defense spending. They learn that the war in Iraq took longer to fight than all of World War II, and that the weapons of

mass destruction whose existence supposedly justified this war weren't found. Finally, they see that George W. Bush's failed economic and foreign policies provided Barack Obama with a full plate. They are left to speculate whether a generous bailout for parts of the financial and auto industries, accompanied by a massive economic stimulus package, may not achieve the desired recovery, or if overtures to Muslims may not bring about a hoped-for peace.

Each chapter is designed to accommodate a wide range of student abilities. The first part of every chapter is written at a lower reading and conceptual level than the second part. The two parts are separated by a series of student exercises, including a graphic organizer and several questions intended to help students master basic information and stimulate higher-order thinking skills. The second part of each chapter, the "For Further Consideration" section, is written at a higher reading and conceptual level. It is followed by a question that requires students to write a strong paragraph and/or be prepared to present their opinions in class. In some cases, this section continues the story; in others, it challenges students to think deeply about issues related to the overarching question raised in the unit. In addition, I (Inquiry)-Charts are provided to help students optimize what they already know or think about a topic and integrate it with identifiable additional information they find in the text and other sources. Finally, each lesson includes vocabulary words and key terms in flash-card format; these can be used either for review or reference.

This unit is also designed to stimulate informed discussions and higher-order thinking skills rather than recitation and rote learning. Students are provided with the information they need to acquire and share factually supported opinions and/or consider important philosophical issues. Students' debating, discussion, and thinking skills get sharpened as they grapple with questions such as whether JFK or Lyndon Johnson deserved credit for the Great Society programs, whether disaster in Vietnam could have been avoided, if Richard Nixon's transgressions were more disreputable than the misdeeds of other presidents, whether Ronald Reagan's arms buildup caused the collapse of the Soviet Union, and whether supply-side economics works.

Chapter 1. John Fitzgerald Kennedy Teacher Page

Overview:

This chapter follows John F. Kennedy's career, starting with his illustrious family and ending with the debate with Richard Nixon. It highlights quotes from JFK's inaugural speech that foreshadow his determination to "pay any price...to assure the survival of liberty," and his pledge to "help the many [countries] that are poor." Much of the remaining parts of this chapter show how Kennedy's foreign policy embraced the promises implicit in this powerful speech. Among other topics, the chapter covers the Peace Corps, the Alliance for Progress, the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the war in Vietnam, and the atmospheric nuclear test ban treaty. The Graphic Organizer question asks students to use phrases from Kennedy's inaugural address to categorize each of these episodes. The "For Further Consideration" section uses Kennedy's words to explain his commitment to landing a man on the moon, and asks students whether Kennedy should be remembered for "piloting the U.S. through international crises not of his making," or for "being reckless in the application of American power."

Objectives:

Students will:

- become familiar with John F. Kennedy's life story, mystique, and the foreign policy issues he confronted
- learn about major foreign policy decisions Kennedy made
- learn that a case can be made that Kennedy's foreign policy decisions were either "reckless" or appropriate

Strategies:

Before class: Assign the chapter either up to or including the "For Further Consideration" section. Inform students that they will be expected to write their answers to all student activities questions covering the assigned section(s).

In class: Begin class by asking students what they knew about JFK before they did their reading and what they have learned from the text. Ask them what they found admirable about Kennedy, what obstacles he had to overcome, and what advantages he had over other candidates for president. Talk to them about the speech he gave during his debates with Richard Nixon and the meaningful phrases in his inaugural address. Ask whether these phrases showed him to be an idealist who wanted to help people or a "tough guy" who was ready to go to war before he would negotiate. Starting with the Peace Corps, review each of the major foreign policy initiatives mentioned in the chapter and ask students which of two characterizations best fit JFK's actions. Toward the end of the period, ask students who read the "For Further

Consideration” section to tell their classmates why JFK was intent on the U.S. winning the race to the moon. End the class by discussing whether Kennedy came across more as a peaceful idealist or a hardheaded cold warrior.

Chapter 1. John Fitzgerald Kennedy I-Chart

	What made JFK an attractive presidential candidate?	What were the major foreign policy decisions President Kennedy made?	Did President Kennedy make the best possible decisions in each case?
What I already know			
What I learned from Chapter 1, Part I			
What I learned from Chapter 1, Part II			
What I still would like to learn about the subject			

Chapter 1. John Fitzgerald Kennedy

inadequately paid

confiscating

guerrilla warfare

perception

conciliatory

strafed

**convention
delegates**

magnanimous

socialist policies

Chapter 1. John Fitzgerald Kennedy

<p>Fighting with terrorist-like hit-and-run attacks</p>	<p>Usually refers to an official taking property without paying for it</p>	<p>Not paid enough based on value of work or need</p>
<p>Attacked with gunfire, often from planes or jets</p>	<p>Trying to make peace</p>	<p>The way something is seen or understood by other people</p>
<p>Policies that tend to have businesses run by the state rather than by individual owners</p>	<p>Generous</p>	<p>People elected to attend a convention in order to decide on their party's goals and leaders. This is how Democrats and Republicans finalize the selection of candidates for president.</p>

Chapter 1

John Fitzgerald Kennedy

Introduction

This chapter introduces you to the early life of America's youngest elected president and explores the contents of his foreign policy. Some historians have rated him as the sixth greatest president to hold that office. You will have the opportunity to explain just what qualities prepared him to become chief executive and then to evaluate his foreign policy. The next chapter covers JFK's domestic policies and his tragic death at the age of 46.

JFK: His Early Years



Kennedy with his wife and children

“Jack,” as his friends called him, was born in Brookline Massachusetts on May 29, 1917. His father, a bank president by the age of 25, was rumored to have been a bootlegger and known to have made a great deal of money in the stock market. Joseph Kennedy was so well schooled in the market's shady practices that President Roosevelt had him supervise it during the 1930s. Like their father, Jack and his three brothers attended Harvard University. The father gave each of his sons enough money when they reached maturity so they could afford to concentrate their efforts on public service. The three older siblings served in the military. Joe Jr., the oldest, was killed when his plane was shot down over the English Channel. Jack served as a Patrol Torpedo boat commander and became a war hero after his ship was split in half by a Japanese destroyer. Though injured in the collision, Jack swam a badly wounded comrade to a distant island. Bobby enlisted in the navy but was never called into active duty.

Jack's political career began after he returned from the war, when he ran an effective political campaign to represent Boston in the House of Representatives. Many believe he won because he used his political connections with his grandfather (a one-time mayor of Boston), the political talent of his brother Robert, the money supplied by his father, and his good looks and personal charm. In 1952, John Kennedy won a seat in the U.S. Senate as a Democrat. Again his father's money and influence, his brother's political acumen, and his own charm and brilliance were deciding factors in his victory.

JFK's first term in the Senate was interrupted by a recurring back injury, which gave him the time to write his second book, *Profiles in Courage*. It received a Pulitzer Prize, became a nationwide bestseller, and earned Kennedy a reputation as an intellectual as well as a politician. The book was also instrumental in providing Kennedy with the opportunity to become a vice-presidential candidate in 1956. After Kennedy spoke in favor of the Democratic nominee, Adlai Stevenson, Stevenson invited the

convention to choose his running mate. JFK's name was put into nomination, and the Massachusetts senator came within 33 votes of being selected.

After coming so close to receiving his party's support for the office of vice-president, Kennedy spent the next three and a half years as an undeclared candidate for the top spot on the ticket. His campaign consisted of giving speeches around the country in support of other Democrats, appearing on television, writing articles, and making friends with potential convention delegates. He stood far ahead of his competitors when the time came for him to officially announce his candidacy. Nevertheless, he had to overcome the perception that religious prejudice against Catholics would prevent him from being elected president of the United States. Kennedy overcame this perception by winning the presidential primary in West Virginia, an overwhelmingly Protestant state.

A New Frontier and the Debates with Vice-President Nixon

In his acceptance speech after winning the Democratic nomination for president in 1960, Kennedy said, "We stand today on the edge of a new frontier—the frontier of the 1960s, a frontier of unknown opportunities and paths," and added, "The new frontier of which I speak is not a set of promises—it is a set of challenges. It sums up not what I intend to offer the American people, but what I intend to ask of them."

Together with his running mate, Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson, Kennedy faced the Republican nominee, Richard Nixon. Nixon's experience as vice-president under President Eisenhower made him a favorite over his younger and less-experienced rival. JFK overcame this disadvantage in the first of four televised presidential debates. Kennedy held his own against Nixon as he pointed out the U.S. could do better under Democratic leadership than it had under eight years of Republican rule:



Kennedy won the first debate partially because he was more photogenic than Vice-President Nixon

...This is a great country, but I think it could be a greater country; and this is a powerful country, but I think it could be a more powerful country. I'm not satisfied to have fifty percent of our steel-mill capacity unused. I'm not satisfied when the United States had last year the lowest rate of economic growth of any major industrialized society in the world. Because economic growth means strength and vitality; it means we're able to sustain our defenses; it means we're able to meet our commitments abroad. . . . I'm not satisfied when the Soviet Union is turning out twice as many scientists and engineers as we are. I'm not satisfied when many of our teachers are inadequately paid, or when our children go to school part-time shifts. I think we should have an educational system second to none.

The Election of 1960

The election results in 1960 were very close. With more than 34 million people going to the polls, John Kennedy received only 120,000 more votes than Richard Nixon. However, the vote was so dispersed that Kennedy won a 303 to 219 electoral-vote majority.

President Kennedy's Inaugural Address



Kennedy giving his inaugural address. Many consider it one of the best ever delivered.

A careful reading of President Kennedy's inaugural address reveals that it was devoted almost entirely to foreign policy. The president pledged that the U.S. would "pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, and oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty." He called for America to stand armed and strong, "for only when our arms are sufficient beyond doubt can we be certain beyond doubt that they will never be employed." He was magnanimous, "to those people in the huts and

villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves," for "if a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich." He was conciliatory "to those nations who would make themselves our adversary, we offer not a pledge but a request: that both sides begin anew the quest for peace," and he was flexible: "Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate." Even Kennedy's most famous line, "ask not what your country can do for you, but for what you can do for your country," was followed by a request to "my fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you—ask what together we can do for the freedom of man."

You may wonder if President Kennedy's foreign policy initiatives carried out the ideas in these famous lines just quoted. Read the following and decide for yourself.

President Kennedy's Foreign Policy: Commitments to the Poor

One of JFK's first foreign policy initiatives was to propose a program known as the Peace Corps. It was designed to provide young Americans who had the necessary skills with the opportunity to serve people living in poverty throughout the world. The president issued an executive order that started this program in March 1961. Less than two years later, 7300 volunteers were serving in 44 different countries. Despite initial criticism, the Peace Corps has received universal praise—people from 139 different countries have applied as volunteers. More than 195,000 Americans performed a variety of jobs in the Peace Corps, ranging from teaching English to digging irrigation ditches for the world's poorest people.

In March of 1961, President Kennedy revealed his plan for forming the Organization of American States to:

build a hemisphere where all men can hope for a suitable standard of living and all can live out their lives in dignity and in freedom.

The U.S. government pledged \$20 billion to the cause over a ten-year period; U.S. businesses were expected to contribute by investing \$80 billion dollars to increase the standard of living of the people of Latin America. However, lack of support from future presidents and Congresses, as well as internal problems within South America, prevented this initiative from achieving its goals.



President Kennedy and the president of Venezuela at a meeting for Alliance of Progress

The Bay of Pigs

Shortly after his inauguration, President Kennedy made his first really difficult foreign policy decision. For some time, the Central Intelligence Agency had been training about 1400 Cuban exiles who had fled their homeland because of the oppressive and socialistic policies of Cuban dictator Fidel Castro. The exiles had come to the United States with horrifying stories of Castro confiscating businesses and plantations belonging to Americans as well as Cubans, and jailing patriotic Cubans who expressed their opposition. They claimed that the Cubans who stayed in their homeland were equally disgusted with Castro for establishing what seemed to be turning into a communist dictatorship.

By the time Kennedy became president, the CIA-trained invasion force was almost ready to go. In early February, Kennedy gave his consent to the operation, and two months later nearly 1400 Cuban exiles landed on the shores of Cuba in a place called the Bay of Pigs. They were met by Cuban planes that strafed the beachheads and sank two supply ships. Within 24 hours, 20,000 men loyal to Fidel Castro arrived in the area. Castro's forces captured 1200 invaders and killed one hundred. Within days, Castro triumphantly marched his captives through the streets of Havana. Rather than overthrowing Castro, this failed invasion made him more popular. Still attempting to remove this communist thorn in America's side, John Kennedy and his brother Robert launched a series of secret but unsuccessful attempts to kill the Cuban dictator.

Kennedy's Foreign Policy: Southeast Asia

President Kennedy came to office at a difficult time in Vietnam's history. The South Vietnamese under President Ngo Dinh Diem had failed to abide by a treaty that

committed them to holding free elections. The elections would have united North and South Vietnam and no less of an authority than former President Eisenhower believed the elections would result in a communist victory. Eisenhower therefore provided aid to South Vietnam in the hopes that the South Vietnamese could withstand a guerrilla warfare attack on their government. President Kennedy decided to continue assisting the South Vietnamese. He introduced an elite military fighting force called the Green Berets to engage in counterinsurgency (anti-guerrilla) warfare. He increased the number of American “military advisors” when he took office from 900 to 16,000. He supported another counterinsurgency plan called the Strategic Hamlet Program. The president felt that the U.S. could not afford to lose Vietnam to the communists under Ho Chi Minh.

President Kennedy and Prime Minister Khrushchev

Early during his presidency, President Kennedy went eyeball to eyeball with Soviet Union Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev. In June 1961, he met the Soviet leader for the first time in order for the two men to get to know one another, but the meeting did not go well. First, Khrushchev confronted Kennedy, lecturing him on foreign policy; Kennedy replied in kind, but left the impression that he was young and inexperienced. Khrushchev’s challenge to his young opponent came soon after in the form of building a wall around the Soviet sector of Berlin. The wall’s purpose was to stop East Germans from escaping to West Berlin and through West Berlin to West Germany.



Kennedy meets Khrushchev in Vienna

Kennedy called up the reserves while continuing to expand conventional forces. He also built up the U.S. offensive missiles that surrounded the Soviet Union. During his campaign for president, Kennedy had claimed that the Soviet Union was ahead of the U.S. in offensive missiles. Although his claim proved false, JFK continued building more missiles and deploying them in silos surrounding the Soviet Union.



Map showing the range of missiles in Cuba

Partially to counter what the USSR thought was a “missile gap” favoring the United States, Nikita Khrushchev allowed Fidel Castro to talk him into installing missiles with nuclear warheads in Cuba. Satellite pictures informed U.S. intelligence agents that the U.S. was about to be confronted by nuclear-armed missiles 90 miles from Florida. On October 16, 1962, aids informed the president of this danger and he immediately convened 26 advisors to help him decide how to respond to this threat. After 13 days of deliberation, speeches in the UN, and the U.S.’s announcement of a naval blockade around Cuba, the Soviets backed down. The U.S. and the USSR reached an

agreement: in exchange for the Soviets removing their missiles from Cuba, the U.S. agreed not to invade Cuba and (secretly) agreed to eventually dismantle obsolete American missiles stationed in Italy and Turkey.

Relations between the U.S. and the USSR improved after the Cuban Missile Crisis. President Kennedy acted more conciliatory toward the Soviet Union, as seen in a speech stressing a mutual interest between the two countries:

For in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet, we all breathe the same air, we all cherish our children's futures, and we are all mortal.

Khrushchev responded to Kennedy by praising his speech and agreeing to arms reduction talks. Both sides agreed to a ban on atmospheric tests of nuclear weapons. However, the U.S. and the Soviet Union could not agree on halting underground weapons testing, and the arms race continued.

Student Activities

A. Student Exercises

Give examples of the qualities and accomplishments that you think helped make John F. Kennedy a successful candidate for president.

B. Graphic Organizer

Explain what happened as a result of the following foreign policy decisions by President Kennedy and use at least three different phrases from his inaugural address to help explain the motives for these actions.

Foreign policy initiative	What happened as a result?	Phrase from inaugural address that explains reason for the initiative
Peace Corps		
Alliance for Progress		
Bay of Pigs		
Response to Berlin Blockade		

Response to missile threat in Cuba		
Continued deployment of nuclear missiles		
Attempts on Castro's life		
Test Ban Treaty		
Support for President Diem of South Vietnam		

For Further Consideration: President Kennedy Shoots for the Moon

In response to the Soviet Union's launch of the manned spacecraft *Sputnik* into orbit around the earth, President Kennedy pledged that the U.S. would surpass the Soviets in space. He proposed to land an American on the moon before the end of the 1960s, stating:



Kennedy giving his moon speech in 1961

...if we are to win the battle that is now going on around the world between freedom and tyranny, the dramatic achievements in space which occurred in recent weeks should have made clear to us all, as did the *Sputnik* in 1957, the impact of this adventure on the minds of men everywhere, who are attempting to make a determination of which road they should take...Now it is time to take longer strides—time for a great new American enterprise—time for this nation to take a clearly leading role in space achievement, which in many ways may hold the key to our future on earth.

...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 the earth. No single space project in this period will be more impressive to mankind, or more important for the long-range exploration of space; and none will be so difficult or expensive to accomplish.

The U.S. redoubled its efforts in space and landed astronaut Neil Armstrong on the moon on July 21, 1969. His words, “one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind,” commemorated this event.

Kennedy's supporters have, in the words of one historian, praised him for “piloting the United States safely through international crises not of his own making” and improving relations with the Soviet Union. His critics, in the words of another historian, have characterized him as reckless “in the application of American power and...provocative and adventuristic.”

Which of the two evaluations seem more convincing to you?

Based on what you know about President Kennedy's foreign policy, decide which of these evaluations you support. Write two strong paragraphs supporting

your opinion and prepare to present your ideas in class, listen to the opinions of others and defend yours or change your mind.

Chapter 16. Barack Obama: A Work in Progress

Teacher Page

Overview:

This chapter was written just four months after Barack Obama became president and can do little more than provide a summary of his life and his successful presidential campaign. Rather than list Obama's achievements while in office, this chapter identifies the problems he faced. In addition, the chapter provides students with a list of Obama's important campaign promises under such headings as "Economic and Fiscal Policies," "Foreign Policy," "Health Care," and "Energy and Environment."¹ Students are asked to select five promises made by Obama and to write a few sentences explaining whether or not they think these proposals would be good for the country. The "For Further Consideration" section asks students to read and respond to Obama's statements of how to handle the large number of foreign policy problems he inherited from previous administrations.

Objectives:

Students will:

- become familiar with Obama's remarkable life story and successful campaign to become president
- understand the problems confronting the U.S. when Obama became president
- discuss their opinions about the Obama programs

Strategy:

Before class: Assign the chapter either up to or including the "Further Consideration" section. Inform students they will be expected to write their answers to all the Student Activities questions covering the assigned section(s).

During class: Start by asking students what they think of Barack Obama in general and what they believe was unique about his life's journey. Proceed by having students ask for your help in understanding Obama's campaign promises and review how much money was spent on the bailout and stimulus packages. Have students share their thoughts about Obama's campaign promises and whether they think they would benefit America. Continue by asking students who read the "For Further Consideration" section to tell their classmates what they learned from doing some research. If you have access to the Internet in class, you can browse PoliticalFact.com's "Obameter" by subject and learn which of Obama's proposals were implemented, rejected, compromised, in the works, or stalled. Be sure to tell students doing this research to press the "more" icon.

¹ The list is based on a campaign document titled "Obama and Biden's Plan for America: Blueprint for Change" and PoliticalFact.com's "Obameter" (<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/promises/>).

Chapter 16. Barack Obama: A Work in Progress I-Chart

	Obama's early life and political career	Obama's campaign promises	How well Obama has succeeded in carrying out his promises
What I already know			
What I learned from Chapter 16, Part I			
What I learned from Chapter 16, Part II			
What I would still like to learn about this subject			

Chapter 16—Barack Obama: A Work in Progress

**keynote
speaker**

“palled around”

extract

prestigious

aspirants

deploy

**community
organizer**

capitalize

**Earned Income
Tax Credit**

Chapter 16—Barack Obama: A Work in Progress

<p>Person who gives the most important speech at a meeting or conference</p>	<p>Hung around with someone who is a friend</p>	<p>To take something out, sometimes by force</p>
<p>Having a very good reputation</p>	<p>People who want to obtain something</p>	<p>To put something in place where it can be used</p>
<p>Person who works in a community helping poor people help themselves</p>	<p>To take advantage of</p>	<p>A payment instead of a tax to make a poor person somewhat better off</p>

Chapter 16

Barack Obama: A Work in Progress

Introduction

Barack Hussein Obama, the first African American to be elected President of the United States, is the son of a white woman from Kansas and a black man from Kenya. He was born in Hawaii and lived in Indonesia for four years before returning to his birth state. He graduated from Columbia University, spent several years as a community organizer in Chicago, attended Harvard Law School (where he presided over the prestigious *Harvard Review*), and returned to Chicago after graduating with highest honors. In the “Windy City,” he joined a law firm that specialized in civil rights cases and taught law at the University of Chicago. He served in the Illinois legislature for seven years and successfully campaigned for a seat in the U.S. Senate in 2004. During the same year he was asked to be the keynote speaker at the Democratic convention and, in the speech that made him famous, he thrilled his audience by declaring “there is not a liberal America and a conservative America; there is the United



Obama and his family after announcing his candidacy for president

States of America.” In November 2007, Obama decided to capitalize on his fame and declare himself a candidate for president. In a well-planned campaign backed by a record financial war chest and fueled by his inspiring speeches, Obama defeated a field of eight aspirants for the nomination. His main opponent was Hillary Clinton, wife of former President Bill Clinton, who hoped to become America’s first female president. John McCain, Obama’s Republican

opponent in the general election, chose a relatively unknown Alaskan governor, Sarah Palin, as his running mate. She spiced up the election campaign by appealing to the Republican base with charges that Obama advocated socialist policies and had “palled around” with William Ayers, who had formerly been part of an American terrorist group known as the Weather Underground. Despite these attacks, Obama won the election by a fairly comfortable margin—53 percent of the popular votes compared to McCain’s 46 percent—and an overwhelming majority of the electoral vote.

On the day president-elect Obama swore his oath to uphold the Constitution, he and his country faced a host of serious problems both foreign and domestic. At home, he inherited a failing economy teetering between a recession and a full-fledged depression. Unemployment stood at a 25-year high at 7.6 percent, 600,000 Americans lost their jobs every month, 265,000 homeowners received foreclosure notices in a single month, and giant brokerage houses and banks stood on the verge of bankruptcy, requiring \$517 billion in bailout loans to sustain them. In the worst week in its history, the Dow Jones stock market average lost 22.1 percent of its value. Overseas, the United States was actively involved in two wars, a belligerent Iran was on the verge of

developing nuclear weapons, and a hostile North Korea probably already had them. In the face of all these problems an all-time high number of 83 percent of those polled said that the country was “headed in the wrong direction.”

This chapter was written barely four months after Obama assumed office. It is therefore impossible at the time of this writing to know how successfully he dealt with the problems that faced him or how he handled events that challenged him in the future. You will be presented with a few of the many promises made by Obama in a campaign document called “Blueprint for Change.” You will be asked how well he has kept these promises.

Economy and Taxes

- Enact a plan for immediate relief for the economy²
- Protect and promote home ownership
- Invest in manufacturing sector and create five million new “green” jobs (see Energy and Environment)
- Cut taxes for middle-class families, veterans, and senior citizens, and expand EITC (Earned Income Tax Credit)
- Repeal the Bush tax cut for wealthy Americans
- Pay for new government programs by increasing taxes or making cuts in other programs

Defense

- Withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq in a responsible manner, preferably within 16 months after taking office
- Deploy an additional 17,000 troops to Afghanistan
- Cooperate with allies to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and North Korea from expanding its weapons program

Energy and Environment

- Raise fuel economy requirements significantly
- Encourage use of renewable energy
- Create five million “green” jobs
- Reduce greenhouse gasses by 80 percent by 2050 under a “cap and trade” system

² After much wrangling with Republicans, Congress passed a \$787 billion stimulus package in March 2009. It included \$215 billion dollars in tax cuts, \$116 billion in medical care (mainly to help states pay their obligations), \$123 billion for education and job training, \$51 billion for energy and the environment, \$45 billion for transportation, \$41 billion for the unemployed, \$21 billion for food assistance, and \$11 billion for direct state aid. This did not include the money spent to bail out large banks and brokerage houses, as well as the money intended to help automakers G.M. and Chrysler avoid bankruptcy.

Health Care

- Sign a universal health care bill providing affordable health insurance for all Americans

Education

- Extend Head Start programs to prepare disadvantaged students for school
- Fully fund No Child Left Behind, improve assessment techniques, and support public schools that need improvement
- Increase financial aid to make public, private, and community colleges affordable

Miscellaneous

- End the use of torture to extract information from prisoners
- Protect a woman's right to choose
- End funding for abstinence-only sex education
- Allow gays and lesbians to openly serve in the military
- Assure couples in civil unions the same rights as married couples

Student Activities

A. Student Exercises:

1. Select five proposals that interest you and write two sentences about each, explaining why you think it would or would not be good for the country.

2. Give an overall evaluation of President Obama’s campaign promises and write a few sentences explaining why you believe one of the following:
 - a. Obama has made promises that he will be unable to keep and should not have made.
 - b. Obama has made a large number of campaign promises that will help the country in many different ways.
 - c. Obama is trying to do too many things for the people of this country that they should be doing for themselves.

For Further Consideration: Obama's Foreign Policy

At the time he took office, President Obama faced an incredible number of foreign problems in addition to the domestic problems already discussed. Many 20th-century presidents had, for the most part, concentrated on a single foreign policy issue, such as the Cold War with the Soviet Union, the war in Vietnam, the invasion of Kuwait, or the danger allegedly posed by Iraq. In contrast, Obama faced an unusually large number of challenges. The Iraq war was winding down, but the U.S. still had 130,000 soldiers there. Its neighbor, Iran, was thought to be on the verge of developing nuclear weapons that would pose a threat to Israel. The Palestinians, longing for a country of their own, still would not recognize Israel's right to exist, and the Israelis would not stop building settlements on land they had taken from the Palestinians. In Asia, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban had the upper hand in the war in Afghanistan and threatened to destabilize Pakistan. The danger of terrorism by Muslim extremists continued to threaten the U.S., its allies, and other countries. In addition to these major threats to America's security, North Korea probably possessed nuclear weapons, most Africans were living in misery, and much of the world economy lay in shambles.

Obama's approach to all of these problems can be summarized in his own words. Read what he had to say and be prepared to decide whether you agree with his approach to America's security and values.

In His Own Words

In General

To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect. To those leaders around the globe who seek to sow conflict, or blame their society's ills on the West, know that your people will judge you on what you can build, not what you destroy.

To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.

On Pakistan and Afghanistan

So I want the American people to understand that we have a clear and focused goal: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future. That's the goal that must be achieved. That is a cause that could not be more just.

On Iraq

By August 31, 2010, our combat mission in Iraq will end and Iraqi Security Forces will have full responsibility for major combat missions. After August 31, 2010, the mission of United States forces in Iraq will fundamentally change. Our forces will have three tasks: train, equip, and advise the Iraqi Security Forces; conduct targeted counterterrorism operations; and provide force protection for military and civilian personnel. The president intends to keep our commitment under the Status of Forces Agreement to remove all of our troops from Iraq by the end of 2011.

On the Israel and the Palestinians

For decades then, there has been a stalemate: two peoples with legitimate aspirations, each with a painful history that makes compromise elusive. It's easy to point fingers—for Palestinians to point to the displacement brought about by Israel's founding, and for Israelis to point to the constant hostility and attacks throughout its history from within its borders as well as beyond. But if we see this conflict only from one side or the other, then we will be blind to the truth: The only resolution is for the aspirations of both sides to be met through two states, where Israelis and Palestinians each live in peace and security.

On Iran and Nuclear Weapons

I recognize it will be hard to overcome decades of mistrust, but we will proceed with courage, rectitude, and resolve. There will be many issues to discuss between our two countries, and we are willing to move forward without preconditions on the basis of mutual respect. But it is clear to all concerned that when it comes to nuclear weapons, we have reached a decisive point. This is not simply about America's interests. It's about preventing a nuclear arms race in the Middle East that could lead this region and the world down a hugely dangerous path.

After reading these quotations from President Obama, select two, and in a paragraph or two explain why you agree or disagree with them. Come to class prepared to share your opinion, listen to the ideas of others, and either defend your own or change your thinking.