

Presidents in the Hot Seat: The Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001

Objectives:

1. Students will be able to use primary evidence to formulate a response to a complex policy problem.
2. Students will be able to use primary evidence to critique the actions of historical decision-makers.
3. Students will be able to analyze and apply primary evidence to develop historical empathy for past decision-makers.

Length of Lesson: Six 45 minute class periods

Materials:

1. Presidents in the Hot Seat: Primary Document Analysis Sheet
2. Day 2 September 11 News Coverage Questionnaire
3. President Primary Documents
4. Secretary of Defense Primary Documents
5. Secretary of State Primary Documents
6. FBI Director Primary Documents
7. CIA Director Primary Documents
8. Links to various online resources needed for the lesson are included throughout this lesson plan.

Start of Lesson

Day 1: How Should the President Respond in a Time of Crisis?

Anticipatory Set (Entire first 45-minute class period): Organize students into groups of five. At the start of class, have students write for five minutes individually in response to the question: “How should the President respond during a crisis?” After this, provide ten minutes for every student to share their responses as a group. Each group must develop a group response to the question. Afterwards, rearrange the classroom seating into a circle, and ask each group to share their responses to the question. Use these responses to begin a Socratic seminar about how the president should respond to a crisis.

Possible follow up questions:

- What should the president immediately inquire about a potential crisis/situation (What questions should the president ask)? What should the President try to learn about the situation?
- What resources does the President have at their disposal to begin dealing with an issue?
- Should the President establish contact with local and state leaders to handle the situation? Should the president ask what they have at their disposal to immediately address the situation?
- Should the president disclose all information to the public or distribute information selectively in order to prevent panic?

Debrief: Have students take out a piece of paper and respond to the following question: If you were the President or one of the President's advisors during a major crisis, how do you think you personally would respond? Why?

Day 2: The Attacks of September 11

Class Starter (1-2 minutes): Yesterday, we discussed how a President might respond to a crisis. For the next couple of days, you will be stepping into the role of President and his advisors in one of the most impactful crises in recent history: the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Today we will be rapidly reviewing the information President Bush, his staff, and high clearance individuals would have had to work with from major news organizations on the morning of September 11. Begin by explaining that major news organizations were reporting in real time and were not actually sure about the specifics of the attacks as they unfolded. Finally, make clear to your students that some of the information in the video is inaccurate and that all of the information surrounding the event was not understood until well after the morning of September 11. *(Note for teacher: The purpose of today is to give students a visual sense of the events of September 11 from the perspective of the news organizations that broadcasted the events live.)*

Activity (30 minutes): Begin playing clips from the ABC news coverage video below, which covers the attacks from shortly after the first plane crash to the fall of the Twin Towers. Coverage of the Pentagon strike is also included. To fit within a class period and also portray the events of the day as the American public saw them, use the time stamps to show the key moments of the video throughout the class period.

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7KYE4zViAAg>

Time stamps:

- 0:00-20:00 (the strikes on the World Trade Center)
- 50:50-54:05 (first reports of smoke in DC and discovery of attack at the Pentagon)
- 1:07:05-1:09:05 (the fall of the South Tower)
- 1:37:00-1:38:22 (the fall of the North Tower)

Suggested Materials to use when watching video: You may want to use the “Day 2 September 11 News Coverage Questionnaire” when showing the video to the students. A template for Cornell notes is also available for interested educators. Allow students to complete the questionnaire/take in order to obtain some background knowledge that will help students to participate in the *Day 3* activities.

Transition: Explain to students that now that they have seen the attacks of the day, you want them to get a sense for the personal terror of those who experienced these attacks. To help understand these attacks on a personal level, they will listen to the final 9-1-1 call of a man who was trapped in the South Tower after the plane struck.

Activity (6 minutes): Play the following video of this phone call from Kevin Cosgrove, who called 9-1-1 after the South Tower was struck. He was trapped in the building, and died in the middle of the phone call as the tower collapsed: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RLW0jKKRXMo>. *(Note to teacher: The purpose of showing this video is to help students get a sense for the level of public fear and terror officials, including the President, would have had to manage in the aftermath of the attacks.)*

Debrief: Direct students to respond to the following questions either on Google Classroom or on a piece of paper:

1. How are you feeling after watching the footage of the September 11 terrorist attacks?
2. More importantly, how do you think the American people felt on this day as they watched these events unfold?

Day 3: Primary source analysis in preparation for the simulation.

Class Starter (3-5 minutes): Today, students will begin evaluating the primary sources for each of the roles the students are to fill. Begin by explaining to students that they will be taking on the role of President Bush and his senior advisors to make a decision about September 11th. Assign each student one of the roles that needs to be filled (President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, Director of Central Intelligence, and the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation)¹. Once students have their roles, provide them with the documents assigned for each role.

Activity (40 minutes): For this activity, it is necessary to allow students time to read through the primary sources assigned to them, and evaluate the merit of the information provided in each document. Have students use the Presidents in the Hot Seat: Primary Document Analysis sheet to help them classify the importance of and make sense of the information they find in their documents. They will use this information tomorrow in a simulation in which they will have to make several difficult decisions based off of what they know.²

Materials to use when working within groups: Students will need to use the primary sources provided to them depending on their role.

¹ In an odd group of six, assign the sixth student the role of Vice President and give them the task of assisting the student playing the role of President in reading primary documents and leading the team meetings.

² This lesson has been intentionally kept short to just one day to induce some stress as students work to both analyze the primary evidence and use that evidence to make a decision “in the hot seat.”

Day 4: Simulation.

Class Starter (3-5 minutes): Today, students will work within their groups of 5 to determine what course of action the President should take in order to effectively respond to the developing situation. Explain to students that their decisions will undoubtedly impact the lives of millions of Americans and that groups should spend time deliberating each decision before committing to a final resolution.

Activity (40 minutes): For this activity, the students should be seated within their groups so that they can discuss the best course of action they need to take to address the situation. Inform the students that they will need to work **collaboratively**, and present to the group the information they deemed important in the primary sources they read yesterday. By the end of class, each group should have answered and turned in all of the *Address to the American People Questionnaire*. Ultimately, students must use this information to make a decision about how the President will respond to the attacks by the end of the class period.

Suggested Materials to use when watching video: You may want to have the news footage from day 2 playing in the background while students read through their primary sources. Photos of President Bush and his staff from September 11, 2001 reveal that the President had the news playing for much of the day while they were determining how to handle the incident:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7KYE4zViAAg>

Day 5: Address to the American People.

Class Starter (3-5 minutes): Today, students will work within their groups to develop a brief 3-5 minute address which will be delivered to the American people. These addresses will explain the decisions they made yesterday about how the President will respond to the attacks. Explain to the students that they need to address how they are planning to secure the immediate safety of the American people, if there is still a possibility of further violence being inflicted, their plan of action to determine who is responsible for the attacks, their plan to restore things back to order, and finally, offer some words of encouragement to quell the fears of the American people.

Activity (30 minutes): Provide students ample time to script out their address the president will deliver to the American people. Inform students that they should use the *Address to the American People* Questionnaire to help them to formulate their response. Students should work **collaboratively** as a group to write the address, however, ultimately the student playing the role of the president will be required to give the address. Each student in the group should be made responsible for writing part of the address that answers one of the questions mentioned in the class starter, in order to promote a fair distribution of the workload.

Activity (10 minutes): The President from each group will deliver their speech to the rest of the class, outlining the course of action they will take to secure the country and respond to the terrorist attacks. The address should be brief, however, and it must adequately cover all of the points mentioned in the *Address to the American People* Questionnaire.³

³ For the sake of time and allowing all groups the opportunity to deliver their press conference, it is recommended that the press conferences be limited to 3 minutes, but teachers may choose to lengthen or shorten this time.

Day 6: Lesson Debrief

Class Starter (5-10 minutes): Up until now, you [the students] have served in the roles of the President and his advisors in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Today, we will analyze the actual response of President George W. Bush to the attacks and compare your responses to his. To ensure our understanding of the events of the crisis, we will look recap how the attacks unfolded that morning. To provide a timeline of these events, play the following video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GmedslmeiUc>. The teacher might also find it useful to review with students the following timeline of events that occurred that day: <https://www.history.com/topics/21st-century/9-11-timeline>.

Transition: As these events unfolded, President George W. Bush was quickly notified of the destruction occurring in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. Now that we have had a chance to review the timeline of events on September 11, we are going to take a look at how President Bush responded at the exact moment in which he was informed of the attacks.

Activity 1: Explain that on the morning of the attacks, President Bush was visiting a first grade classroom in Florida. He was sitting in front of this class of students during a reading lesson when the White House Chief of Staff approached him and told him of the attack. Play the following video for students, which captures this moment: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rg5NvKpJfKE>. After the video, ask students the following discussion questions as a class:

1. What did you notice about President Bush's demeanor/facial expressions before his advisor whispered the news to him? (*He is generally engaged and smiling, and is interacting with the lesson.*)
2. What did you notice about President Bush's demeanor/facial expressions after he hears the news? (*After he hears the news, he is very serious and no longer smiling. He does pick up the book the students are reading but is not very focused on it. He constantly looks around the room, especially in the direction of his advisors standing to his right.*)
3. What do you think President Bush should have done immediately after his advisor told him of the attacks? Do you agree with his decision to stay sitting in the classroom after hearing the news?

Explain to students that President Bush's response after being informed about the attacks in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania has been widely criticized because people see his lack of action as negligent - that is, they believe he should have left the classroom and immediately responded to the crisis. However, others argue that it is important to consider the audience seated immediately in front of the President (a

classroom of first graders), as well as the fact that there probably was nothing he could do that moment that was not already being done.

Activity 2: Next, we will look at the decisions President Bush made to respond to the attacks and improve the security of the United States. Begin by playing Bush's address to the American people the evening of September 11 using the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUXiByDQ3bA>. Discuss with students how President Bush explains the causes of the attack, why he believes the attack occurred, and the measures he had taken that day to respond to the disaster. Then, explain the following events as Bush's response in the days following the attacks:⁴

1. After he was informed of the attacks, President Bush was ushered in an empty classroom, where he began watching live news reports of the attacks.
2. At 9:45 a.m., Bush makes the decision to ground all aircraft, shutting down the American airspace. International flights are rerouted as needed; some are even grounded in Canada.
3. At 1 p.m., President Bush announces that the U.S. military has been placed on high alert all around the world.
4. At 2:51 p.m., the U.S. Navy dispatches missile destroyers to New York and Washington, DC.
5. At 8:30 p.m., President Bush gives his address to the nation (that students just viewed) from the White House, declaring that the United States would win a "war against terrorism"
6. At 9 p.m., Bush meets with his National Security council and then a small group of advisors afterward. By this point, they have a significant amount of evidence suggesting that Osama bin Laden, the leader of the terrorist group al-Qaeda, is responsible for the attacks. CIA Director George Tenet suggests that the Taliban, which controls Afghanistan (the home of al-Qaeda), and al-Qaeda are dually responsible. Bush says, "Tell the Taliban we're finished with them."
7. On September 20, 2001 - more than a week after the attacks - President Bush addresses Congress. In this speech to Congress, the U.S., and the rest of the world, Bush sends an ultimatum to the Taliban in Afghanistan either hand over the terrorists or be considered an ally of the terrorists, and therefore an enemy of the United States. The Taliban refused to comply with these demands.
8. On October 7, 2001, the United States and the United Kingdom launch Operation Enduring Freedom, an invasion of Afghanistan intended to remove the Taliban from power and combat al-Qaeda forces. Osama bin Laden was not located until nearly a decade later, when he was found hiding in nearby Pakistan. On May 1,

⁴ Teachers may want to write this timeline on the board, create a separate handout for students, or creating a slideshow outlining his response.

2011, a team of Navy SEALs carried out Operation Neptune's Spear to assassinate bin Laden. The operation was successful.

Explain to students that as citizens, it is important to be able to critique the actions of elected leaders, especially the President of the United States. As part of that, however, it is important to note that there are only six living people who understand what is like to be the President.⁵ These six people are the only people who can empathize with one another about the experience of facing a crisis situation affecting the American public, and they are the only six people who understand the weight of that responsibility as the entire United States turns to them for a response.

Final Debrief: Ask students to respond to the following questions (on paper or online, such as on Google Classroom):

1. How was your group's response to the attacks similar to President Bush's response? How was it different? Explain.
2. How has your knowledge of the responsibilities and pressures of the American presidency changed as a result of this simulation? Explain.⁶

End of Lesson

⁵ Current living Presidents as of November 2018: Jimmy Carter, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump.

⁶ Student responses may vary based on teacher wishes. It is recommended that the students' responses be at least a 5-sentence paragraph to encourage deeper reflective thoughts.