

THE WHITE HOUSE  
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

## CLASSROOM | 4-8 Lessons : “The Presidents Speak”

In a democratic nation like the United States, where citizens determine by their votes who will serve them in government, it is important that citizens have contact with their representatives. On the highest national level, this means that Americans need to know what the president is thinking, what his plans are, and how he hopes to tackle those challenges that concern them. Throughout history, presidents have used all technology available to help them reach greater numbers of Americans. As new inventions increased the ability to communicate, presidents made good use of them.

When first president George Washington (1789-1797) took office, he decided that he would visit every state in the nation — from New Hampshire to Georgia. He took trips at different times, one to the north and another through the southern states. He traveled on horseback and in a horse-drawn carriage. The journey to the south took more than two months and Washington traveled almost 2,000 miles. Washington believed that this was the best way to get to know the American people, the cities and towns they lived in, the land they farmed, and the system of roads upon which they traveled (the roads were mostly sandy, muddy, or bumpy).

Washington also knew that the American people were curious about him. What did Washington look like, they wondered? What sort of man is he? Most Americans had never seen him face-to-face, and many had not even seen a picture of him. More importantly, the citizens had never seen a president — any president — before. Washington’s tour of the United States marked the first time a president had communicated with the nation. Even though Washington knew his speeches to Congress would be published in newspapers, this was not the same as making contact with Americans.



*Citizens of Trenton, New Jersey greet George Washington in 1789. Library of Congress*



James Monroe (1817-1825), our fifth president, served more than 30 years after Washington but still found that the best way to speak to citizens was by touring, just like Washington did, by carriage and horse. He really had no other choice at that time in history. Transportation and communication would move forward during the Civil War and afterward, and presidents have always taken advantage of new technologies. During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln (1861-1865) used a telegraph to keep in touch with his battlefield generals. He walked across the White House lawn to the War Department where the telegraph was installed.

In 1877, President Rutherford B. Hayes (1877-1881) spoke on the telephone to the instrument's inventor, Alexander Graham Bell. Two years later, Hayes had his own telephone in the White House. But the invention was so new that very few homes or offices in Washington had phones, so Hayes had few people to talk to. In fact, the president's telephone number was "1." Men who were campaigning to be president used another invention, the phonograph. Recordings were made of campaign speeches, to get the word out about a candidate and his political views before the election. In the presidential race of 1908, for instance, records (or "disks") of William Howard Taft and William Jennings Bryan could be purchased and then played at a church, or other gathering place, in towns which these presidential candidates could not visit by train. The records would come with a photograph of the candidate, so voters knew what he looked like. In 1920, Warren G. Harding also used the phonograph, recording a speech into a horn that caused his voice to press a needle into a wax disk.



*Lincoln walks to the War Department building to use the telegraph. Painting by Tom Freeman, 1998*



*William Howard Taft makes a call. Library of Congress*



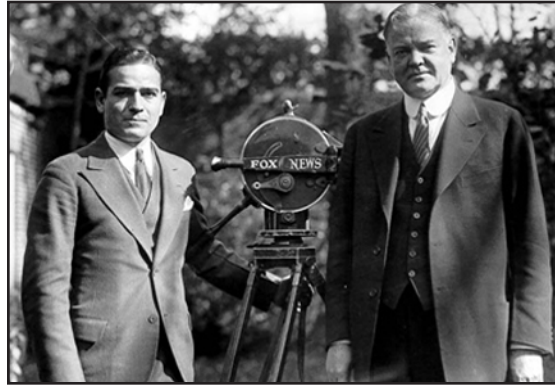
*Warren Harding records his voice for the phonograph, ca. 1923. Library of Congress*



The White House was brought into the modern age of communication when Calvin Coolidge (1923-1929) made the first presidential radio broadcast from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Compare the number of people presidents could reach before and after radio. President Andrew Jackson (1829-1837), a very popular leader, spoke to only 10,000 people at his inauguration. One hundred years later, President Warren Harding (1921-1923) was heard before an audience of 125,000. President Coolidge broadcast his inaugural address to 23 million radio listeners on March 4, 1925. His voice was carried through telephone lines across the nation. No one knows exactly how many people saw George Washington on his carriage tours, but even if he saw 1,000 people every day lined up on the streets, or at ceremonies, only about 100,000 Americans would have seen him — and this was after three months of traveling! In just an instant, 23 million Americans heard Coolidge speak.



*Calvin Coolidge was the first president to use radio extensively. Library of Congress*



*In the 1930's, Herbert Hoover (right) used film to communicate with Americans. Library of Congress*

Probably the most successful communicator on the radio was Franklin Roosevelt (1933-1945). From the room now known as the Diplomatic Reception Room, on the ground floor of the White House, Roosevelt used his “fireside chats” to talk directly to Americans about the problems they were facing during the Great Depression in the 1930s and during World War II in the 1940s. Families and friends would sit in their living rooms, by their fireplaces, and listen to the president on their radios. On Sunday night, March 12, 1933, 60 million Americans heard Roosevelt present his first “fireside chat.” His calming voice and simple language helped all Americans understand complicated issues and made them believe that the president was working hard to correct the problems they faced in their everyday lives. Before the United States joined the fight against Adolph Hitler’s Germany in World War II, Great Britain asked for America’s help in their struggle against the Nazis. When Roosevelt wanted to explain why the U.S. was lending England guns and ships, he compared it to lending your neighbor a garden hose while his house was on fire — you lend your neighbor what he needs in an emergency, and worry about being repaid later.





*In the 1930's, Herbert Hoover (right) used records to communicate with Americans. Library of Congress*



*Franklin Roosevelt delivers a fireside chat over the radio. Library of Congress*

Harry S. Truman (1945-1953) was the first president to appear on television from the White House. On October 5, 1947, he spoke about the world food crisis. His speech was seen in New York and Philadelphia. Just two years later, about 10 million viewers saw Truman's inauguration, and more than 100 million heard it on the radio.

Today, you can turn on the television and see the president almost any day of the year. You can read entire speeches on the Internet and send an email message to the president by visiting the White House website, [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov). When the president must leave the White House on business or on vacation, he can speak to the American people from anywhere in the world using satellites to beam his message around the globe.

