

## TEACHER GUIDE

**1936 DOC. #1: “Fireside Chat” Radio Clip****OPENING:**

“My friends, the American public and the American newspapers are certainly creatures of habit. This is one of the warmest evenings that I have ever felt in Washington, D.C., and yet this talk tonight will be referred to as a fireside talk.

Our Government, happily, is a democracy. As part of the democratic process, your President is again taking an opportunity to report on the progress of national affairs, to report to the real rulers of this country —the voting public.”

**CLOSING**

“This being a free country with freedom of expression—especially with freedom of the press, as is entirely proper—there will be a lot of mean blows struck between now and Election Day. By ‘blows’ I mean misrepresentation and personal attack and appeals to prejudice. It would be a lot better, of course, if campaigns everywhere could be waged with arguments instead of with blows.

I hope the liberal candidates will confine themselves to argument and not resort to blows. For in nine cases out of ten the speaker or the writer who, seeking to influence public opinion, descends from calm argument to unfair blows hurts himself more than his opponent.

The Chinese have a story on this—a story based on three or four thousand years of civilization. Two Chinese coolies were arguing heatedly in the middle of a crowd in the street. A stranger expressed surprise that no blows were being struck by them. His Chinese friend replied: ‘The man who strikes first admits that his ideas have given out.’

I know that neither in the summer primaries nor in the November elections will the American voters fail to spot the candidate whose ideas have given out.”

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Franklin Roosevelt was the first President to make extensive use of radio as a means to communicate his ideas. Before his presidency, other Presidents might have made speeches that were broadcast but none before or since have been able to master the use of radio as a political tool like Roosevelt did. Radio was a powerful tool for conveying the great personal charm of a man grown so large in the public imagination that it was his personality that became the major issue.

During his dozen years in office from 1933 to 1945 Roosevelt held some 31 Fireside Chats. These chats were intended to be conversations with, as Roosevelt said, “the real rulers of this country – the voting public.” Each chat lasted from 10 to 30 minutes and was usually broadcast live in the evening in an informal setting at the White House. When he delivered these talks, Roosevelt would have six microphones and a few friends present. His listening audience numbered as high as 60 million since nearly every family in the U.S. owned a radio by the 1930s. He received nearly half-a-million letters following his first chat in March of 1933, just weeks after taking office for the first time.

The excerpt that you will hear includes the beginning and the ending of a chat Roosevelt gave on June 24, 1938, midway into his second term. His talk that evening concerned his right to speak out about the upcoming political party primaries. Some Republicans had criticized him for becoming involved in party politics while serving as President. Roosevelt felt strongly that it was his right and duty to participate in the national dialogue about politics and the issues of the day.

> **Play the audio clip.**

QUESTION **What is it about the style or tone of Roosevelt's delivery that made him such an effective radio communicator?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER His style was simple, clear, and friendly. His delivery was confident and expressive. He told stories and had a sense of humor.

SEE NOTE

QUESTION **What main message is Roosevelt trying to convey? Give evidence.**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Free expression in a democracy is good when practiced without attacking others.

EVIDENCE campaigns would be better "with arguments instead of with blows"; story that ends with "the man who strikes first admits that his ideas have given out"

**NOTE**

It was often said that it seemed like he was talking to each listener personally instead of a faceless crowd.

**FURTHER QUESTIONS**

Did Roosevelt's access to free radio time give him an unfair advantage when he ran for reelection?

Why might Roosevelt, as an incumbent President, want to minimize negative campaigning?

What made radio as a communication device an improvement over "whistle-stop" speeches from the back of a train?

Compare the impact of a speech printed in a newspaper, broadcast on radio, or aired on television. Which do you think is most effective and why?

Should Presidents become involved publicly in party politics such as working to help elect others of their own party? Why or why not?

Should a candidate's personal style and charm be a determining factor in his or her election? Why or why not?

**1936 DOC. #1**

**FDR:**  
**"FIRESIDE**  
**CHAT" ON**  
**JUNE 24, 1938**

**"Fireside Chat" Radio Clip**

**Audio Clip**

**ADDITIONAL INFO**

For many in the 1930s, listening to the radio was a community experience. People would often gather together with family or friends to listen to and discuss the President's remarks. This made the experience of listening to a Fireside Chat seem more interactive, like a dialogue, as Roosevelt intended.

Newspaper editors were often critical of Roosevelt. He used the radio as a means to go directly "to the people" rather than having to rely on the print media to translate his words. This greatly increased his popularity with the public while often frustrating his critics in the press.

Roosevelt took great care in his radio remarks and delivery. He would call in a Navy corpsman before every broadcast to spray his throat and to care for his sinuses in order to give his voice the "perfect" or best tone. Famous writer John Dos Passos described Roosevelt's voice as "the patron voice, the headmaster's admonishing voice, the bedside doctor's voice that spoke to each man and to all of us" (Smith 190).

**CONNECTIONS**

(see thematic listing)

**Media Bias**  
**Reaching Voters** (radio)