

# THE SOUL OF AMERICA

KNOW OUR PAST.  
SHAPE OUR FUTURE.

## LESSON SIX Our Better Angels and Our Worst Instincts Today



# OVERVIEW

## Materials

- Previous Exit Tickets of students
- Optional: Transcript of Jon Meacham's Speech: St. Sebastian (edited for brevity)

## Length

One 55-minute class period to explain assignments and have students begin in class. The time needed to complete their demonstration of their argument will vary.



"CHANGE IN AMERICA COMES WHEN THE POWERFUL TAKE NOTICE OF WHAT THE PEOPLE HAVE BEEN SAYING. AND WHEN THOSE THINGS INTERSECT THAT'S HOW HISTORY IS MADE."

- JON MEACHAM

# ACTIVITY: FINAL ESSAY ASSIGNMENT



## Opening

After exploring, researching, and analyzing Jon Meacham's historical argument, explain to students that they will now be drafting their own historical argument on the soul of America.

As an introduction to this assignment, share this quote and take a moment to discuss students' reactions and reflections.

"THERE HAVE BEEN THREE GREAT INFLECTION POINTS IN TERMS OF THE BROAD IDENTITY POLITICS IN THE AMERICAN CONTEXT—ABOLITION, EMANCIPATION, SUFFRAGE, AND THEN THE END OF JIM CROW. A COMMON LESSON THERE IS THAT THE LEADERSHIP CLASSES LAGGED BEHIND THE ACTIVIST CLASSES. THE ACTIVISTS WERE RIGHT LONGER THAN THE LEADERSHIP WAS. AND WHAT I WOULD HOPE IS THAT IN TELLING THAT STORY, WE WOULD PROMPT PEOPLE TO SAY, WHAT ARE THE ACTIVISTS TELLING US THAT WE'RE NOT EITHER LISTENING CLOSELY ENOUGH TO OR NOT REACTING TO? BECAUSE IF THE VOICES OF ABOLITION WERE RIGHT EARLY, AND THEY WERE, AND THE VOICES FOR SUFFRAGE WERE RIGHT EARLY, AND THEY WERE, AND THE VOICES AGAINST JIM CROW WERE RIGHT EARLY, AND THEY WERE, WHAT ARE THE VOICES NOW THAT ARE RIGHT AND EARLY AND WE'RE NOT PAYING ATTENTION TO?"

- JON MEACHAM



## Share this writing prompt

Based upon the historical case studies examined in **THE SOUL OF AMERICA**, what do you believe constitutes the soul of America today?

As an introduction to this assignment, share this quote from Meacham and take a moment to discuss students' reactions and reflections.



*Optional: Assign students to read the abridged transcript that Jon Meacham gave at St. Sebastian School in Needham, Massachusetts on September 11, 2019.*

Have students return to their Exit Ticket summaries and select one they believe will support their argument about what constitutes the “soul of America.” Their historical argument can take a creative form, but needs to have a well written component and be concise.

Here are several options to consider:

- Podcast (script included)
- Short film (script included)
- Photo essay (artist statement)
- Op-Ed
- Speech for an event or local rally

As they build their argument, make sure they include:

- A description of the event or era from the past they are drawing from
- The context in which the event unfolds
- Evidence from the past and the present to support the argument
- How the historical event connects to a contemporary issue

## HANDOUT ONE:

# Jon Meacham: St. Sebastian Speech

[Meacham, Jon. "Summer Reading Assembly Address", 11 September, 2019,  
St. Sebastian School, Needham, MA]

History turns on different days, but there is a certain stream of value and vision that links the eras. And so what I'd like to talk about, with our time together this morning, is moments that have felt like this one. You all are coming of age at a particularly divisive time. We are at a moment in the life of the nation where people tend to be more tribal. They pick a team and decide what they think, as opposed to thinking, and then picking a team. Politically. And that's problematic because it puts identity ahead of reason. . . .

I would submit that that is one of the most important gifts we can give the country now, because you need a coherent vision, but it must be a coherent vision that is always open to reacting to changing circumstances, changing data, and facts. To simply enter the world with, "This is how it is," and not changing it at all, no matter what happens, is really a form of idolatry almost. It's putting your views in the place of central importance. And that's not what we're supposed to do.

We're given a brain for a reason. We're given a heart for a reason. And we have to make sure the two are communicating. There's a border between them, not a wall, but a little border. But it has to be a permeable border. So I think the American story in many ways is at its best when the brain and the heart are in conversation, and when they are both open to changing their minds. And when they are devoted to making that sentence, the Thomas Jefferson sentence about all men being created equal, apply to as many people as possible. Jefferson didn't mean everybody when he sat down to write that in June of 1776. He meant white men. He didn't mean women, he didn't mean people of color, he didn't mean indentured servants. But the story of the country is one in which we have more generously understood what that sentence meant. And I promise you this. If you think of an era that you'd like to go back to. "You know what? I'd like to beam myself to back to year X." I promise you that you'd only want to stay if that were an era where we were widening access to the mainstream. Where we were opening our arms, and not clenching our fists.

The men who hit the beaches of Normandy. The men at Bunker Hill. The men who fought through the Pacific Islands were not doing so to close doors. They were doing so to open them. They were doing so to more generously apply that sentence. And this is not a partisan point. I think the fact that that even seems partisan. The idea that we should simply be fair minded and try to be part of an American tradition where we include more people than we exclude. The fact that that might even sound partisan is a sign of how far the conversation is off beam at the moment.

So here's the chief point. The American story I submit is a story of more generously applying the Jeffersonian idea that everybody gets a chance. We can't guarantee outcomes. We're not about that, but we are about guaranteeing opportunity. What Lincoln called, "A fair chance for your industry, intelligence, and enterprise." A fair chance. And at every point in American history, when we have had an era that is worth emulating, or that we commemorate, that has been the drama. That has been the story we tell. And we see things as stories. That is an intrinsic, human impulse: "In the beginning." "Once upon a time." That's the way we understand things.

So I want to give you a couple of examples that I think that story has been most relevant. Let's start 101 years ago today. If we had been here in September, 1918 . . . What would have been going on? We would be fighting the first world war. Woodrow Wilson, president of the United States would have just re-segregated the federal government. He closed down 400 newspapers and magazines with which he disagreed. You think fake news just started? The Ku Klux Klan was re-founded in 1915 at Stone Mountain, Georgia. It attracted two to six million Americans 100 years ago, the Klan. 50,000 Klansmen marched down Pennsylvania Avenue in 1925 without bothering to wear a mask. The governors of Texas, Georgia, Colorado, Indiana, and Oregon were all members of the KKK 100 years ago. 30 members of the house, six United States senators.

And see if any of this sounds familiar. There was an immense anxiety about immigration. We were debating whether to limit immigration into the country because a lot of white folks worried that immigrants were coming in and were taking jobs that they wanted and needed. The 1924 Democratic National Convention down in New York went 103 ballots. They usually went to one, maybe two because there were 347 members of the KKK who were delegates to that convention who would not vote for Al Smith, the governor of New York because he was an Irish Catholic. Roman Catholicism 100 years ago was seen as almost the Sharia law of the era.

There was a case in Oregon. And a Klan-dominated legislature in Oregon passed a law in the 1920s saying that every school-age child, you all had to go to public school. Why was that? They were trying to shut down the nuns. They didn't want schools like this [St. Sebastian] to exist because Roman Catholicism was seen as a foreign force. The second Klan, the first one right after the Civil War, and now this one, and the one in the 1920s, believed that Roman Catholicism was an un-American foreign force of disorder and possible, even revolution. 100 years ago.

So I tell you this because we always have to remember that the problems of our own time may feel insuperable. They may feel intractable, but in many, many cases we've been here before. So what we have to do is look back and figure out, "How the hell did we get out of it the first time?" Because if we think the past is always easier...

The past was sort of this nostalgic place where people walked around in frock coats.... At no point since the first chapter of Genesis has anybody thought everything was perfect. Their present. Our past was their present. Think about that. Our past was their present. So our present is somebody else's past. So what are we going to do with it? Are they going to look back on this, and is somebody going to stand here in 100 years and talk about this era and say, "100 years ago a president of the United States wanted to build a wall. Wanted to separate children from their parents at the border. Wanted to send people who were born here back to a country they didn't know." Maybe. So you have to decide. What do you want the future to say about us? If you want somebody like me, standing here talking about it, they're going to tell a good story if we are more generous hearted. It's not that complicated.

It's the core message of the gospel. It's the core message of the verse of Leviticus, to love one another as you would love yourself. And I would argue. . . altruism, empathy, is in fact a utilitarian way of looking at the world. There's a utility to altruism. If I'm nice to you, there's a heck of a lot better chance that you're going to be nice to me. If I reach out to you when you fall, that raises the chances that when I fall, which inevitably will happen, you'll stick your hand out. So even if you don't feel that you want to be generous, it's in your interest to be generous, because that's what is repaid. That's the bread upon the waters. And that is a perennial theme in American life.

So how do we get out of the 1920s? Here's a sentence you don't hear much; Harding and Coolidge did the right thing. Coolidge I know is a neighbor. Coolidge didn't talk very much, and a woman came up to him once at the White House, actually, and said, "I have a bet with my husband that I can make you say three words," And he said, "You lose." . . . So they spoke out against the Klan. The Supreme Court threw out that law in Oregon. The press did the right thing. They were revelation after revelation about what the clan was doing.

We basically decided that that's not who we wanted to be. But don't let anybody say, and you'll hear this a lot in the news. When something bad happens, they'll say, "This isn't who we are." It is who we are. . .

In Genesis, when God breathes life into man, life could be translated as soul. When Jesus said, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends"—life could be translated as soul. Socrates called it the animating reality. So in both pagan thought and Christian thought and Jewish thought, it is the center of who we are. But my argument is that that soul is not all good or all bad. It's the arena in which our worst instincts and our better angels do battle. . . .

One of my favorite lines in all of American literature is from Tom Sawyer. Tom Sawyer tells the story about, he was there in the town in Hannibal, and a minister came to town, and evangelists held a revival meeting, and he was such a good preacher that "even Huck Finn was saved until Tuesday." It's really easy to be saved until Tuesday. It's Wednesday that things get really complicated. And that's true of all of us. You know this is true in your own life. So of course it's going to be true in the country.

So what do you do with that? It's not about lowering your expectations, but it is about giving you a sense of proportion. The world is fallen. The world is frail. The world is fallible. If you expect that the world is going to work out entirely the way you want it to, you are destined to be frustrated, and you are more likely to be one of those folks who picks a team and then thinks, as opposed to think and then decide what to do. Because there is something in us that wants a unifying answer.

We have been given the gift of reason for a reason, and I would urge you to think historically as much as possible. Not because if you know what happened during the New Deal, therefore you'll know how to pass legislation now. History is not a GPS. It's not an intellectual Uber. You can't call it and go somewhere. But it is an orienting force. It gives you a sense of what has been possible in the past, and what might, therefore, be possible today.

Because think about what we've done in this country. We have gone from it being a colony of a distant king, to a complicated, not particularly well-run country under the articles of confederation. . . . A meeting of 55 white men in Philadelphia who wrote a constitution that endures unto this hour, but which explicitly protected the slave trade, decided that enslaved persons were only worth three fifths of what a white person was worth. A document inspired by the Enlightenment, but not a great poster for that, was it?

We've come through the Civil War. We've come through the Second World War. We've come through the Cold War. And at every point we've done so because we've decided, you know what? We are stronger the more widely we open our arms. And it's not partisan. It's just what it is.