

# The Presidential Timeline Project

Most students learn history, government, and politics through textbooks. And most textbooks have the space to offer only a single narrative account of any given event or period. Even when the teacher asks penetrating questions or leads lively discussions, students are led to experience these events as a kind of inevitable narrative, like the plot of a novel.

Unlike students, scholars have a different experience of the “story” of past events because they have the privilege of reading original documents and of immersing themselves in the confusion and inexact knowledge that historical figures experienced at the time. In the case of presidential decision-making, leaders often had incomplete knowledge and were encountering pressures from other directions at the time they were faced with important decisions. Presidents make difficult decisions in the company of other strong individuals with competing agendas and in the glare of media attention that is inevitably focused on only part of the picture. Scholars working in archives get a much more complex view of the difficulties of leaders making decisions.

Until recently, students had very little chance of sharing in the excitement of grappling with original documents. Now, with the capacity to digitize archival material, the opportunity exists to give students a different experience of the past—one that is much more nuanced and challenging, and that can also be much more engaging.

The Presidential Timeline project brings together the Learning Technology Center, in the College of Education at The University of Texas at Austin, and The National Archives' twelve Presidential Libraries in the creation of a web-based resource providing access to the growing store of digitized assets from the Libraries' collections. The goal of the project is to make this ever-growing collection of primary and secondary source materials readily and freely available to students, educators, and adult learners throughout the world via a single unified and intuitive interface.

In addition to the Timeline itself, a select team of educators - among them K-12 teachers, university faculty members, and education specialists from the Presidential Libraries – are collaborating in the development of educational activities that utilize the Timeline. These activities will be designed so as to require that students engage in the analysis and synthesis of primary resources and present their findings in a coherent and logical manner. A central theme underlying many of these activities will focus on major historical decision points faced by each administration. The entire project is being architected and developed in a way that will support the dynamic growth of both the Timeline and the educational resources that utilize it.