

WASHINGTON IN THE 60s

Discussion Guide

Washington in the '60s Discussion Guide

The decade of the 1960s in Washington was a time of dramatic transformation and an era of great tumult and uncertainty, as the sleepy southern town became a bustling modern metropolis of world renown. WETA TV 26's documentary, *Washington in the '60s*, looks back on that epoch – one of the most intriguing chapters in local history.

The following discussion questions are designed to be used in informal and formal educational settings. Before you view, go over the introduction and previewing themes with your students. As they view, have them pay particular attention to the individuals featured and the connections between past and present in the documentary. Then review the discussion questions in each section with the class, or have them break into small groups to discuss.

For more depth, look at the topic, show the related video clip(s) and review the additional discussion questions.

Age of Camelot

Themes

- The Kennedy administration as a catalyst for change in Washington, D.C.
- Washingtonians get the right to vote in a presidential election
- The effect of President Kennedy's assassination on the District and on the nation

Discussion Questions

1. Describe some of the aspects of Washington, D.C. that made it feel like small town America prior to the 1960s in the areas of entertainment, politics and employment.
2. How did the arrival of President Kennedy's administration change the small town character of the city?
3. Prior to 1964, District residents didn't have the right to vote in any national elections. The 23rd Amendment granted residents three electoral votes for President and a delegate in the House of Representatives. Although the District did not have full voting rights, why do you think the passing of the 23rd Amendment was important to Washingtonians?
4. Why do you think Washington was especially affected by the assassination of President Kennedy?

Related Video

- Kennedy Election
- Kennedy Assassination

Additional Discussion Questions

1. What was the significance of presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey's statement that he didn't want the delegate votes from people who opposed Kennedy just because he was Catholic?
 2. Do you think you would hear a similar comment from presidential candidates today? Why or why not?
 3. How did Kennedy's campaign message on civil rights differ from the policies of the Eisenhower period? How did this message send a signal of hope and transition to potential voters?
 4. Why was President Kennedy's assassination such an emotional shock to so many people in the country?
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The Unfinished Business of the Kennedy Administration

Themes

- Glen Echo as the enduring symbol of racial inequality
- The Kennedy administration's inability to bridge the racial divide
- Segregation by law vs. segregation by culture

Discussion Questions

1. Provide examples of the cultural segregation that existed in Washington, D.C. at the end of the Kennedy presidency. How can it be said that this racial divide was unfinished business for President Kennedy and his administration?
2. How did Glen Echo Park symbolize the racial divide in the District of Columbia?
3. How did the cultural segregation of Washington, D.C. carry over to the federal control of the city?
4. Why do you think there was so much resistance in Congress to granting home rule in D.C.?
5. How does this resistance come in conflict with the American tradition of democratic rule?

Related Video

- The Dawning of the '60s: The Segregated City

Additional Discussion Questions

1. Describe some of the segregation customs young people of Washington D.C. experienced in the 1960s?
 2. Describe the irony over white people feeling uncomfortable around blacks and their feelings about black music?
 3. Why do you think some white people felt no racial tension around blacks and others did?
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Alienated, the Black Community Turns Socially and Culturally Inward

Themes

- African-Americans create a unique brand of segregation
- A strong black middle class moves to the suburbs
- Washington's status as a black cultural center

Discussion Questions

1. Unable to assimilate into white society, blacks formed their own social organizations, mirroring white society, but never being a part of it. How did the cultural rich environment created by blacks in the 1960s create a unique brand of segregation?
2. Do you think there is still a resistance by whites to stay in a neighborhood that is being integrated by blacks or vice-versa?
3. How did the growth of black music venues establish Washington D.C. as a black cultural center?

Related Video

- Blockbusting

Additional Discussion Questions

1. Contrast perspectives held by whites and blacks regarding the term "blockbusting."
 2. How do you think the increase in Hispanic immigrants has changed the traditional dynamics of "white flight"?
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March on Washington

Themes

- The March on Washington as a protest and communal celebration
- The District of Columbia became a showcase for the nation's progressive politics
- How a group of committed individuals can work together to bring about change

Discussion Questions

1. How did the 1963 March on Washington embody the idea that the nation's capital was the place to initiate change?
2. How did this event also reflect a change in race relations in the country?

1. How did the March on Washington further encourage people to openly talk about racial inequality?

Related Video

- Memories of the March on Washington

Additional Questions

1. How did Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech transcend the racial divide of the United States and take on significant meaning to what was going on internationally in the 1960s?
 2. How did this event dispel many of the notions some people had about peaceful demonstrations on racial equality?
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1967 Year of Transition and Change

Themes

- The bus boycott becomes a symbol of African-American resistance to discrimination
- The central role of music in the civil rights movement
- The emergence of African-American leadership

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think the city's dispossessed was more inclined to gravitate to leaders like Marion Barry?
2. Why do you think the white middle class showed favoritism towards Barry?
3. Why was the play, *The Great White Hope*, such a ground-breaking event in 1967?
4. How did the appointment of Walter Washington as the Chief Executive of Washington, D.C. help further the quest for home rule? How did it fall short?

Related Video

- 1967 Year of Transition and Change

Additional Discussion Questions

1. What was Pride, Inc.? How did it represent a second step to the Civil Rights Movement?
 2. How did the activism of outsiders like Marion Barry upset the "gentlemen's agreement" that existed between middle class blacks and white members of Congress who controlled Washington, D.C. politics?
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Martin Luther King, Jr. Assassinated and D.C. Explodes

Themes

- The positive results of the riots after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.
- The color blind fight against poverty gains notoriety

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think some in the black community expressed their grief over the assassination of Dr. King with rage and violence on their own community?
2. In what ways did the federal law enforcement try to intervene to stop the violence and potentially undermine the authority of Walter Washington?
3. How did Washington's refusal to heed the FBI's advice show courage?
4. How did the rise of social activists like Petey Green and Julius Hobson help bring about change for the better? How was their message appeal to many poor and disenfranchised residents of Washington, D.C.?

Related Video

- Riots

Additional Discussion Questions

1. Why were the riots so disturbing to people who lived in the neighborhoods where the violence was taking place?
 2. What were some of the less than rational recollections some of the interviewees had about the riots? Why do you think such actions took place?
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Race Activism and Anti-War Protests

Themes

- Resurrection City – its failure and its lesson to organized demonstrations
- Anti-war protests epitomize the discontent of the times
- The Vietnam War bridges the region's economic and color divide

Discussion Questions

1. For many, what was the connection between anti-poverty and anti-war?
2. What was Resurrection City?
3. Why do you think Resurrection City failed to achieve its goals?
4. How did the more organized protests of 1969 give many people a feeling that the country was in danger of revolution or anarchy?

Related Video

- Vietnam's Toll on D.C.'s African-American Community

Additional Discussion Questions

1. Why did there seem to be a disproportionate amount of blacks serving in the military during the Vietnam War?
2. How did the experience of African-Americans' fighting in Vietnam contribute to problems back home when they returned?

About the Author: Greg Timmons is a freelance curriculum writer, and educational consultant of web-based and broadcast media materials. After a 30 year career as a social studies teacher in the public schools, he has written and consulted for several national news and educational organizations including FRONTLINE, the *NewsHour*, History Channel, Colonial Williamsburg, and other projects for WETA.