

Firecrackers in the House Chamber: The 1954 Shooting

RECOMMENDED GRADE LEVEL

Grades 7 to 12

OVERVIEW

This activity is designed to accompany the Office of the House Historian's online exhibition (<http://history.house.gov/1954shooting/>) about the shooting in the House Chamber on March 1, 1954. Students will have the opportunity to learn about this historic event at the Capitol through the eyes of witnesses to the attack.

CURRICULUM CONNECTION

- U.S. History; American Government; Social Studies; Oral History
- Individuals, Groups, and Institutions; Power, Authority, and Governance; Civic Ideals and Practices

OBJECTIVES

1. Students should be able to explain what happened at the U.S. Capitol on March 1, 1954, and be able to discuss the historical significance of the event.
2. Students should be able to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of using eyewitness accounts and oral histories when studying the past.
3. Students should be able to explain the role of perspective in observing and recalling events.

LESSON PLAN

1. To help introduce students to the upcoming activity, lead a brief discussion using the questions below:
 - a. What are some typical forms of protest? Why do people/groups protest? What is the role of the government in these protests?
 - b. What was the political status of Puerto Rico in 1954?
 - c. What are the potential benefits of eyewitness accounts? What are the potential drawbacks?
 - d. What role does perspective play in witnessing and recalling events? Why do individual accounts vary when recalling the same event?
2. Review the exhibition, "Firecrackers in the House Chamber: The 1954 Shooting," with your students. Watch the *Universal-International News* footage of the attack at the Capitol in 1954.
3. Encourage students to take notes and write down any questions they may have about the material they read or watched.
4. Have students complete the first column of the worksheet, "Firecrackers in the House Chamber: The 1954 Shooting/Learning from Eyewitnesses" (p. 4). They can do this independently or in groups.

5. To prepare for the activity have students:
 - a. Watch the Office of the Historian oral history clips from eyewitnesses of the event, <http://history.house.gov/Oral-History/Events/1954-Shooting/>
 - b. Read the eyewitness accounts from “Firecrackers in the House Chamber: The 1954 Shooting/Eyewitness Accounts” (p. 3)
6. Now have students return to the worksheet, “Firecrackers in the House Chamber: The 1954 Shooting/Learning from Eyewitnesses” (p. 4). Ask them to complete the two remaining columns and to discuss what they learned and still would like to know about the event. (Their observations for this part of the activity should come from the eyewitness accounts in the oral history clips and from “Firecrackers in the House Chamber: The 1954 Shooting/Eyewitness Accounts” [p. 3]).
7. As a wrap up to the activity, ask each group to make a five-minute presentation discussing
 - a. What they learned about the event from the eyewitnesses
 - b. What they still want to know
 - c. How they might be able to find the answers to their questions
8. If time allows, lead a discussion about perspective and the role it plays in witnessing both historic and everyday events.

SUGGESTED EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

- Have students conduct their own oral histories with people who witnessed a historic event in their community. Alternatively, students can research a major event and locate quotes and/or oral histories of eyewitnesses.
- Ask students to keep a journal for one week. The journal should include their observations of events both in and out of school. Have students write a short essay about the experience that focuses on perspective.
- Ask students to design an exhibit featuring artifacts connected to the 1954 shooting in the House Chamber. Have students describe the event in their own words, using the artifacts as the focal point and means to reconstructing what took place at the Capitol.

Firecrackers in the House Chamber: The 1954 Shooting Eyewitness Accounts

- “As I was counting the vote, starting with the Republicans on the left-hand side of the aisle as I faced them, a firecracker—or so I thought—was set up in Gallery 11 at the extreme end of the chamber to my left. Too busy to take note of the disturbance at the moment, the thought flashed through my mind that I would order the sergeant-at-arms up to deal with the pranksters as soon as I had completed the count. When a second and third report followed in rapid succession, I swung around in exasperation. Instead of seeing firecrackers, as I had expected, I found myself looking, at a distance, at the muzzle of a pistol. As I gaped, I saw three assailants—a woman and two men (I later learned that there was a third man whom I could not see)—and they all seemed to be aiming German pistols at me. Bullets whistled through the chamber in the wildest scene in the entire history of Congress. Pandemonium spread so fast that control was wrenched from my hands.” —**Joe Martin, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives**
Joe Martin: My First Fifty Years in Politics as Told to Robert J. Donovan (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960): 216–217.
- “After this episode all sorts of schemes were brought to me for increasing the protection of members of the House against similar attacks. We did indeed tighten up the security arrangements a good deal. Nevertheless I rejected the most ambitious proposal, one that called for installation of bullet-proof glass around the front of the galleries. For one thing, I was advised that the weight of this glass would be too great for the galleries to support. For another, I felt that, danger or not, Americans do not want their Congress walled off from the people by glass.” —**Joe Martin, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives**
Joe Martin: My First Fifty Years in Politics as Told to Robert J. Donovan (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960): 220.
- “It was an enjoyable trip. I looked at the animals, the vegetation. I was going to give my life for my country . . . I was going to give the shout of liberty.” —**Lolita Lebron, one of the four Puerto Rican Nationalists convicted of the shooting in the House Chamber on March 1, 1954**
Manuel Roig-Franzia, “A Terrorist in the House,” *Washington Post Magazine*, February 22, 2004: 16.
- “[I was] just sitting there listening to the conversation on the floor when two men and a woman burst into shooting. Suddenly I saw some men fall to the floor and people ducking under their seats. The woman was acting like she was crazy. She kept screaming and shouting: ‘Kill ‘em, kill ‘em!’” —**Carol Lynn, 6th grade student from Maryland**
“Pupils Watching ‘Democracy in Action’ See History Made,” *Baltimore Sun*, March 2, 1954: 30.
- “I said, ‘There’s been a shooting in the House of Representatives. You got to send an ambulance.’ He said, ‘Kid, you shouldn’t joke about things like that,’ and hung up the phone.” —**Art Cameron, House Page**
Bree Hocking, “Together Again: 1950s–Era Pages Return to the Capitol, Full of Memories,” *Roll Call*, September 20, 2004.

