

Topic: Holidays and Traditions – Presidents’ Day

Let’s get started...

On the third Monday in February every year, Americans celebrate the birthdays of two famous Presidents from American history – George Washington (February 22) and Abraham Lincoln (February 12). Presidents’ Day is a national, or federal, holiday. Schools, banks and post offices are closed. All federal offices and agencies are closed. Most state and local offices are closed. Stores are open, and many stores have “holiday sales” with discounted prices.

Background:

Many years ago, the United States celebrated two national holidays in February – on February 12 for Abraham Lincoln’s birthday, and on February 22 for George Washington’s birthday. In 1968, the federal government decided to combine the holidays into one, to call it “Presidents’ Day,” and to celebrate it on a Monday, so that federal workers could have a three day weekend off from work.

Americans honor George Washington as the “Father of the Country.” He was the first president. **[More history:** After the 13 colonies united to form an independent country and declare independence from Great Britain (England, he was the General in charge of the Revolutionary Army that fought against the British to gain independence for the new country. He was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1776), and a member of the Continental Congress and Constitutional Convention that drafted the United States Constitution in 1787.]

Americans honor Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States, for his role in keeping the country together during America’s Civil War. The southern states wanted to separate (secede) and form an independent country to keep their slave-holding, farming life style. Abraham Lincoln declared the freedom of slaves in a famous speech called “The Emancipation Proclamation.” Lincoln was assassinated in 1865.



In pairs for 5 minutes, ask and answer these questions:

In your country, is there a special day to honor a leader of your country? When is the day? Who does it honor? Is it a historical political leader, or a current leader?

How does your country celebrate the day? Are there speeches, parades, special music, food, or colors? Tell a partner about the customs, traditions, and ways of celebrating.

Share your partner’s answers with the group.

Discussion Questions:

Does your native country have any especially beloved or popular leaders from history? What qualities did this (or these) leader(s) have? Why are these qualities important to your culture and to the people in your country? Tell about the values and qualities important for a leader in your country to have. Why do people in your country respect these qualities in a leader?

When did your native land become a country with a government? Is the form of government today the same as the form of government at the beginning of your country's history? If it is different, tell about the differences.

Does your country have any minority religious or ethnic groups? What are these groups? How are they treated in your country?

Has your native country ever had a civil war? If the answer is yes, when was this civil war, and what were the issues? How were the problems resolved?

Has your country had problems with human rights issues, either in the past, or today? Tell about these problems. Why do you think problems like this occur in any country? What should governments and individual people do about these problems?

In your native country, do people oppose (disagree publicly) with any government policies? What happens to people who organize groups to oppose governmental policies? Is organized opposition to governmental policies good or bad? Why?

Have any groups in your country's history "split off" from the main country to form a separate, independent country? If the answer is, who were the groups, when did this separation happen, and what is the situation today?

In your opinion, what makes a strong leader for a country? What makes a good leader? Is a strong leader always a good leader? Is a good leader necessarily a strong leader?

In your opinion, what are the most important qualities for a good, strong leader of a country? Name the 3 most important qualities to you. Exchange ideas with a partner, and give reasons why you agree or disagree with your partner's list of qualities.

If you could have any leader in the world to be the leader of your country, who would it be, and why? (Any leader, from history or today, from any country in the world.) Why?

If you could "invent" an ideal leader, what qualities would the leader have? Would the leader be male or female, of a majority or minority ethnic or religious group? Would the leader be one person, or a committee of people (a coalition government)? What do you think? Why? Compare ideas with a partner, or a small group, from different countries. Do your partner or the members of your small group agree or disagree with your ideas? Why or why not? Do people from the same country have the same ideas?

New words and Idioms:

Political, leader, heroic, brave, courageous, strong, honest, thoughtful, wise, qualities, respect, opinion, agree, disagree, separate, split off, situation, independent, oppose, policy, policies, civil war, human rights, especially, beloved, current, speeches, parades, values, invent, ethnic, religious, coalition, committee, majority, minority, beloved, declare, speech, situation, discounted, necessarily, majority, minority.