

Brother, Can You Spare A Billion? The Story of Jesse H. Jones

TEACHER'S GUIDE

SYNOPSIS

Prior to the Great Depression, the United States had not been in such desperate straits since the Civil War. This desperate nation turned the reins of government over to Franklin D. Roosevelt, who referred to “one third of the nation ill-fed, ill-clothed and ill-housed” in his inaugural address in March 1933. Solving the nation’s problems would require extraordinary measures and leadership that was bolder and more innovative than the nation had ever seen. Jesse H. Jones of Houston, Texas, was a man who supplied such leadership. Within a few years, many observers were calling Jones the second-most-powerful man in the nation after the President. Today, Jones is all but forgotten. However, an examination of his life can reveal much about American history.

Jesse Holman Jones was born on a tobacco farm in Tennessee in 1874. After only eight years of formal education, he went to work for his father and later moved to Texas to work in his uncle’s lumber business. He moved to Houston, Texas, in 1898 and within 10 years was building Houston’s tallest buildings, its most luxurious hotels and its most ornate theaters. Jones also owned the city’s biggest bank and newspaper. Jones knew that those enterprises would flourish only if Houston prospered. He became Houston’s most prominent civic booster. He urged businesses to make Houston their headquarters. He worked for the construction of the Houston Ship Channel, and in a masterful stroke of civic promotion he procured the 1928 Democratic National Convention for Houston. The Houston of 1898 to which Jones came was a small southern town. Jones’ efforts helped it become a cosmopolitan center of commerce, education and culture.

Jones, a staunch supporter of Woodrow Wilson, was enlisted by the President to recruit physicians and nurses and coordinate battlefield aid during World War I through the American Red Cross. After distinguishing himself with the Red Cross, Jones returned to Houston, where he continued building and became deeply involved with the Democratic Party. In 1932, President Herbert Hoover named Jones to the newly created Reconstruction Finance Corporation. Jones was to devote the next 13 years to public service, first combating the Great Depression, and later insuring that the U.S. had the industrial capacity to enter World War II. Never before had an appointed official been entrusted with so much power over the nation’s industry, finance and commerce.

After being forced to resign as Secretary of Commerce in 1945, Jones returned to Houston and devoted himself to his philanthropic, civic and business interests until his death in 1956. This documentary tells the story of the remarkable Jesse H. Jones, who was so powerful that he came to be known as the “fourth branch of government.”

TO THE TEACHER Before the students view the documentary, examine the activities and select those that are appropriate for your learning objective and the ability level of your students. Introduce the video by using information from the Synopsis and the instructions that accompany the activities you have selected. All numbers placed in parenthesis are approximate VCR time codes for quick reference to segments of the film that expand on the cited subject matter. The following material is appropriate for grade levels 6-8.

ACTIVITY ONE: Constructing a Timeline of the Life of Jesse Jones

Direct students to construct a timeline on either individual sheets of paper or the chalkboard. The timeline should include the years 1870 to 1960. Divide the timeline into equal 10-year segments. As students watch the video, instruct them to place the events of the video in the proper location on the timeline. They may put events in the life of Jesse Jones on one side of the timeline and events of national significance on the other.

Here are representative events students should look for:

- 1874 — Jones is born in Tennessee (00:05:00 - 00:07:18)
- 1898 — Jones moves to Houston to manage his uncle's estate
- 1898 — U.S. fights war with Spain (00:07:19 - 00:10:40)
- 1901 — Massive oil discovery at Spindletop
- 1914 — Houston Ship Channel opens
- 1914 — War erupts in Europe (00:14:40 - 00:15:20)
- 1917 — U.S. enters World War I
- 1917 — President Wilson appoints Jones to Red Cross (00:15:21 - 00:18:39)
- 1920 — Constitution amended to allow women the right to vote
- 1920 — Jones marries Mary Gibbs Jones (00:11:07 - 00:12:40)
- 1928 — Jones brings Democratic National Convention to Houston (00:20:08)
- 1928 — Herbert Hoover elected President
- 1929 — Stock market crash ushers in Great Depression (00:23:40)
- 1931 — Jones solves Houston bank crisis (00:01:18)
- 1932 — Hoover appoints Jones to newly created RFC (00:24:05)
- 1932 — Franklin D. Roosevelt elected President
- 1933 — New Deal begins; Jones appointed chair of RFC (00:26:03 - 00:28:32)
- 1939 — All federal lending agencies put under Jones
- 1939 — War erupts in Europe 1939-All federal lending... (00:33:35)
- 1940 — Roosevelt elected for third term
- 1940 — Jones begins conversion to military economy (00:43:03)
- 1941 — U.S. formally enters World War II
- 1944 — Roosevelt elected to a fourth term (00:49:10)
- 1945 — Jones resigns as Secretary of Commerce
- 1945 — Roosevelt dies, Truman sworn in as President
- 1945 — World War II ends
- 1946 — Jones returns to Houston
- 1956 — Jones dies in Houston

Ask students to locate the connections between events in Jones's personal Life and national events of some significance (for example, "President Wilson appoints Jones to Red Cross"). Ask students to research the significance of this event in national life, as well as learn more about Jones's role in it. The result of this research might be an informational essay, or a fictitious letter or diary entry written by Jones describing his involvement and its national impact.

--Understands how the United States changed between the post-World War I years and the eve of the Great Depression

--Understands the causes of the Great Depression and how it affected American society

--Understands how the New Deal addressed the Great Depression, transformed American federalism, and initiated the welfare state

ACTIVITY TWO: The Many Roles Jesse Jones Played

Create a “role wheel” by slicing a circle into five sections. Label each slice of the circle as a separate role. The roles are Businessman, Civic Leader, Public Servant, Philanthropist and Family Man. Explain and give examples of each role. For example, a philanthropist is a person who shares his or her wealth to help others. When Jones donated money to orphanages or to establish college scholarships, he was acting as a philanthropist. Tell the students to view the video and try to find examples for each of the sections of the role wheel. After the video, allow students to share their results. After a brief sharing time, have students respond to the following discussion questions:

Which of Jones’ roles do you admire most?

Do the roles change through Jones’ life, or do they stay the same?

Is there ever conflict between the roles? If so, how does Jones resolve it?

What roles do students hope to play in their own future? Ask students to complete a "role wheel" for themselves and discuss in small groups or with the class. Additionally, students might identify opportunities to explore certain roles in the local community. For instance, if students identify "community leader" as one of the roles they hope to serve, they might interview community leaders in their town, or identify different organizations that work in that vein.

-- Understands the importance for individuals and society of commonly held personal responsibilities such as taking care of one's self, supporting one's family, accepting responsibility for the consequences of one's actions, adhering to moral principles, considering the rights and interests of others, and behaving in a civil manner

-- Understands the meaning of civic responsibilities as distinguished from personal responsibilities, and understands contemporary issues that involve civic responsibilities (e.g., low voter participation, avoidance of jury duty, failure to be informed about public issues)

-- Understands how citizens' responsibilities as Americans could require the subordination of their personal rights and interests to the public good

-- Understands the importance of both political and social participation and what distinguishes one from the other (e.g., participating in a campaign to change laws regulating the care of children as opposed to volunteering to care for children), and knows opportunities for both political and social participation in the local community

-- Understands the importance of political leadership, public service, and a knowledgeable citizenry in American constitutional democracy

ACTIVITY THREE: Building a Life

After viewing the documentary, read or summarize the following text for the students:

One of Jesse Jones' most prominent roles were that of a builder. The documentary mentions how Jones built office buildings, houses and public buildings. Jones paid special attention to building good foundations that could support the weight of more floors to be added later. In another sense, we are all builders too. Instead of building with brick, glass and steel, we build our lives with principles that shape our thoughts and actions. Just as in the construction industry, so too in life, solid foundations are the key to success. The documentary you watched illuminated some of the principles by which Jesse Jones lived.

What we believe always finds some expression in our actions. What examples did you see in the documentary that shows how Jones put his principles into action? (Allow students to give examples of how Jones put each principle into action. For example, equal opportunity for all is illustrated by his Wilsonian devotion to fair economic competition. His focus on the common good is illustrated by his leaving personal business interests to serve his country in the Red Cross, the New Deal and World War II mobilization. His compassion is shown by his many charitable activities, and his conservative economic policies by his RFC directives.)

Jesse Jones' Principles

Equal opportunity for all

(00:35:35 - 00:38:47)

(00:52:51)

Focus on the common good

(00:01:24 - 00:03:45)

(00:13:45 - 00:14:40)

Compassion

(00:15:21 - 00:18:39)

Conservative economic policies about lending money

(00:26:03 - 00:28:32)

(00:28:38 - 00:30:53)

(00:30:53 - 00:32:44)

(00:53:29 - 00:54:01)

Suppose Jesse Jones could come and talk to your class. He would probably talk about those four principles. How would he describe and define each one? Do these four principles mean the same thing today that they did in Jones' day?

These last questions can be the basis of a class discussion, or the teacher can use them as writing prompts for student essays.

Lead students in a discussion of their findings. Then, ask students to research the modern-day legacy of one of the institutions or events described previously (the RFC, FDIC, Federal National Mortgage Association, etc.).

- *Understands the causes of the Great Depression and how it affected American society*
- *Understands how the New Deal addressed the Great Depression, transformed American federalism, and initiated the welfare state*
- *Understands the roles government plays in the United States economy*

Brief Evaluation

Many teachers will want a brief evaluative exercise to use as closure after viewing the documentary. Here are some questions that can be used.

- 1. What was Jesse Jones' main contribution to the Allied victory in World War II?**
 - a. Diplomatic efforts that kept the Allies united throughout the war.
 - b. Planning the Allied invasion of Europe.
 - c. Helping industries produce the weapons the military needed.
 - d. Keeping the morale of the soldiers high.

- 2. What did Jesse Jones believe about loans to distressed businesses during the Great Depression?**
 - a. The government should not compete with private banks in lending to companies.
 - b. Loans should be made only to businesses with excellent collateral.
 - c. The main reason for the government to loan money to businesses was to earn interest and therefore bring revenue into the Treasury.
 - d. Getting cash into the economy through the wise use of credit would help the nation recover.

- 3. What actions best demonstrated Jones' focus on the common good?**
 - a. His fighting in both World War I and World War II.
 - b. His building memorials to heroes in American history.
 - c. His leaving private business to work in the government.
 - d. His running for public office three times.

- 4. What was Jesse Jones' main contribution to the Democratic Party in the 1920s?**
 - a. Raising campaign funds.
 - b. Recruiting candidates.
 - c. Touring the country giving speeches.
 - d. Serving in public office.

5. **Which activity best shows Jesse Jones' philanthropic values?**
- a. Building hotels and houses.
 - b. Donating millions of dollars to charities.
 - c. Serving in Roosevelt's cabinet.
 - d. Bringing the Democratic National Convention to Houston in 1928.
6. **What was the source of Jesse Jones' wealth?**
- a. Oil.
 - b. Real estate and banking.
 - c. Government contracts to supply the military.
 - d. Inheritance.
7. **What was the main activity of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation under Jones?**
- a. Lending money to businesses.
 - b. Closing down bankrupt businesses.
 - c. Opening new businesses to put people to work.
 - d. Publishing new regulations for businesses.

KEY: 1. C 2. D 3. C 4. A 5. B 6. B 7. A

Compare and contrast Jesse Jones in World War I and World War II.

Compare and contrast Jesse Jones in the New Deal and in World War II.

Compare and contrast the economic philosophies of Jesse Jones and Henry Wallace.

An expanded version of this *Teacher's Guide*, along with additional classroom resources are available on-line at www.rice.edu/armadillo/jones/.

KUHT / Houston Public Television is a service of the University of Houston System, and is supported through ACT/Association for Community Television.