

## **Why use diplomatic oral histories in the classroom?**

Diplomacy is the art of conducting international relations, resolving disputes and frictions between nations, and negotiating alliances and coalitions. Diplomats exercise tact and skill in dealing with people of varied backgrounds to advance our nation's interests and security. The success of our foreign policy, peace, prosperity, and security depends in large measure on the knowledge, skill, and experience of diplomats.

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (ADST) captures, preserves, and shares the experiences of U.S. Foreign Service officers (FSOs), family members, and others involved with diplomacy, to strengthen public appreciation of diplomacy's contributions to America's national interest. ADST's collection of primary-source oral histories, available for free at [adst.org/oral-history](http://adst.org/oral-history) and at the [Library of Congress website](http://www.loc.gov) now exceeds 2,600 interviews in transcript form, via podcast, and some in video format. Our oral histories provide a rich and vivid context for individuals' lives from their point of view, in order to gain better insight for many historical events covering World War II through the present. Take a look at some "[Moments](#)" in American diplomacy on our website.

### **Using Oral History as a Primary Source**

Primary sources are the raw material of history, as distinct from secondary sources, which are not based on firsthand observations or experience. A book about the end of the Soviet Union and the Cold War is a secondary source. The reports made by American diplomats to Washington are primary sources. So are the oral histories recorded by American diplomats. Indeed, oral histories are usually quite frank, and they often include conversations and character estimates not found in formal diplomatic communications. Examining primary sources can give your students a powerful sense of history and the complexity of the past.

Simply put, oral histories can make your classroom content come alive. If your class is studying a particular historical topic, primary source oral histories can provide social, cultural, and personal context that can enrich your curriculum in a way not otherwise possible. Historical records and documents often lack the everyday experiences of people, how they felt about a particular topic, why they made certain decisions, and how historical events impacted their personal lives. As historical agents of change, these individuals made an impact shaped by their time, place, circumstance, and specific role and responsibilities working for our government.

Using oral histories in your classroom also provides opportunities for your students to analyze the authenticity and credibility of sources and develop perspectives of time and

place, all higher-order thinking skills. Using oral histories as primary sources also presents some challenges. Memory is often imperfect, and some people may sanitize their recollections or choose which topics to discuss. Examining these challenges can be useful to developing students' critical thinking skills.

Finally, reading oral histories can introduce your students to a career in international relations and diplomacy. The Foreign Service is a great career path, but many of our citizens don't learn about it as an option until after their careers are over.

Oral histories can show how Foreign Service officers work on a broad range of important issues that relate directly to social studies curricula, such as environmental issues, climate change, counterterrorism, women's rights, conflict resolution, technology, science, human trafficking, global health, and the preservation of cultural property, among others.

The same histories illustrate how diplomats become specialists about the country to which they are assigned, its language, politics, economics, history, culture, and traditions. Daily, diplomats work with a fascinating range of people beyond host country officials, from artists and musicians to parliamentarians, journalists, and scientists. They conduct high-level discussions with foreign leaders, analyze political and economic developments, write speeches for their ambassadors, and engage in social media. Above all, they are masters at communicating across cultures.