

# Remapping Neural Circuits, Civics, and Presidential Libraries: Coincidences? You Be the Judge

C. Frederick Risinger

**Maybe I've been paying more attention** to the coincidences in my life lately, but just as I was beginning to write this column, two coincidences occurred that influenced the websites I selected and the way I designed the column.

First, I've been noticing that I'm reading less lately. Of course, I read all day long—newspapers, magazines, and on the Internet. My wife, Pegi, calls me a “news junkie.” But I don't sit for 2-3 hours at a time and read a book like I used to. I read in shorter, less frequent intervals, and therefore, I'm not reading as many books as I did several years ago. This has been bothering me a bit ... and then I received the July/August issue of *The Atlantic* magazine, titled “The Ideas Issue.” The featured article is titled “Is Google Making Us Stoopid?” (Thankfully, they use the correct spelling of “Stupid” on the article inside.) But I found out that I'm not alone in my concern about my reading habits. The author, Nicholas Carr, concurred. He says “Immersing myself in a book or lengthy article used to be easy ... I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. Now my concentration often starts to drift away after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something to do.” Carr appears to be describing me—and according to his article, thousands of others. I don't want

to recount the entire article, but it's worth reading. Basically, he contends that the Internet is changing the way we acquire information, use information, and even the way we think—he calls it “neural re-mapping.” *The Atlantic* is my favorite magazine; they are forward thinking enough to not limit their articles to subscribers only. Others can access Carr's column (which contains great anecdotes about how Socrates worried about the development of writing and scholars complained that the printing press would result in “weakening ... minds”) at [www.theatlantic.com/doc/200807/google](http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200807/google).

To carry the coincidence further, I was recently in Austin, Texas, attending the annual meeting of the Social Science Education Consortium (SSEC). *The Austin Statesman* newspaper ran two columns by *Miami Herald* Pulitzer Prize columnist Leonard Pitts Jr. The first, on June 18, discussed the impact of the Internet on the way news is collected and delivered and the second, on June 20, referred directly to *The Atlantic* article I discussed above. *The Miami Herald* won't let non-subscribers read

their articles, but *The Austin Statesman* does (search “Leonard Pitts” at [www.statesman.com](http://www.statesman.com)).

Now, to my second coincidence (and this one surprised me even more). This issue of *Social Education* usually has a “civics/citizenship” theme. It's a presidential election year, so I planned to highlight a group of websites that would help teachers bring the election into their classrooms. Then, I thought, “Nah, there'll be more information—on both the Internet and from other sources—than teachers could ever use.” So, I decided that I would focus on presidential libraries. It's a presidential election and presidential libraries have a lot of civics and civics history in them. And, I knew that several presidential libraries had special sections on their websites designed especially for teachers and students. Then, when I was in Austin for the SSEC meeting, I read the *Daily Texan*, the University of Texas student paper. Like the *Indiana Daily Student* here at Indiana University, it's a great paper, highlighting all the student-oriented news, but also covering Austin and the surrounding area. On June 19, I saw an article that dovetailed wonderfully with my plans to cover presidential libraries. The University of Texas School of Education has received a grant from the National Endowment

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for the Humanities to fund a project that will set up teacher workshops on using presidential libraries in the classroom. The project, titled “Using Primary Artifacts to Understand Presidential Decision Making,” will set up a website where teachers and K-12 students can view a timeline of digitally scanned historical documents. These include the document President Harry S. Truman signed to authorize the use of the atomic bomb and sound clips recording the phone call that President Lyndon B. Johnson received informing him of the attacks on U.S. naval vessels in the Gulf of Tonkin. Paul Resta, at the UT School of Education, will be the project director; it’s a joint project with the university, the presidential libraries, and NEH.

The following day, we went to the Johnson Presidential Library. I had visited Jimmy Carter’s presidential library before, coincidentally at another SSEC annual meeting. I have also visited the Gerald Ford Presidential Library in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I had always thought that there should be a way to discuss these in one of my columns. And now I knew it would be possible because of the soon-to-be special website where teachers throughout the nation (and world) can access digital copies of original sources. Last night, as I reviewed the sites, I listened to Eleanor Roosevelt give a wonderful speech on the evening of December 7, 1941, when Pearl Harbor was attacked. I didn’t know it, but Mrs. Roosevelt gave a radio chat every Sunday night.

I also didn’t know that there are 12 presidential libraries. I reviewed all of them and found that some were much more “teacher-student friendly” than others. All of them had sections for educators, students, or researchers, but many include lesson plans, examples of National History Day projects, and artifacts that seem to humanize the president, and often the first lady. I looked at LBJ’s and

FDR’s report cards and also read Fala’s biography (FDR’s dog).

What is great about the new University of Texas-based NEH project is that they already have a website titled “Presidential Timeline” (See the “Teaching with Documents” column in *Social Education*, April 2007).<sup>1</sup> The website has links to each of the 12 presidential libraries. I’ll list these below with a sentence or two about each. I have listed the primary addresses, but each site has a “For Teachers” or “For Students” section.



### The Presidential Timeline of the Twentieth Century

[www.presidentialtimeline.org/index.php](http://www.presidentialtimeline.org/index.php)

This website has photographs of all the presidents from Hoover through Clinton—so it’s not really all the presidents of the twentieth century, but only those who have presidential libraries. It also has an “interactive timeline,” showing the major social, political, and economic events that occurred in each president’s tenure. Additionally, there is an “Educators” section helping teachers bring the resources of the presidential libraries to their classrooms. Go to “About the Project” for a list of web links to all presidential libraries. I imagine that this section will expand dramatically once the newly-funded project gets up to speed.

### Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum

[hoover.archives.gov/](http://hoover.archives.gov/)

Viewers can see replicas of Hoover’s birthplace and the Quaker meeting house he attended as a boy. The “Teachers” page has several games such as “Hoover Wore Many Hats” and “Hoover’s Cross Country Adventure,” where students can “drive a car” by

answering state trivia questions.

**Franklin D. Roosevelt  
Presidential Library and Museum**  
[www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu](http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu)

There are two well-designed curriculum guides available for teachers. One is on the plight of farmers during the Great Depression and the other is on the role of African American soldiers in World War II.



**Harry S. Truman Presidential  
Library and Museum**

[www.trumanlibrary.org](http://www.trumanlibrary.org)

The educator's section has several curriculum plans designed by the National Endowment for the Humanities. They include lessons on the Cold War, the end of World War II, the Korean War, and the Red Scare. There is also a lesson on analyzing primary sources.



**Dwight D. Eisenhower  
Presidential Library and Museum**

[www.eisenhower.archives.gov](http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov)

The educator's section features a description of the Eisenhower Library's Five Star Leaders program, in which students from grades 8–12, as well as at the college level, work with adults to solve problems, accomplish a mission, or confront a crisis. It includes a half-day workshop at the Library in Abilene, Kansas. There are also curriculum packages designed for the K-8

grades on a wide variety of topics and issues.

**John F. Kennedy Presidential  
Library and Museum**

[www.jfklibrary.org](http://www.jfklibrary.org)

When you open this site, you hear a stirring excerpt from JFK's "Ask not what your country can do for you" speech. There are a tremendous amount of student activities and teacher resources. The Kennedy Library sponsors one- and two-week conferences and workshops where teachers can earn professional development credit. This website is particularly "teacher-friendly."

**Lyndon Baines Johnson Library  
and Museum**

[www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/](http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/)

One of the highlights of my LBJ Library visit was a "Family Album," in which Lady Bird Johnson's biography and accomplishments are recounted. Another was the lifelike replica of Johnson telling five stories about growing up in Texas. There are many teacher resources, as well as samples of winning History Day projects.

**The Nixon Library and Museum**

[www.nixon.archives.gov](http://www.nixon.archives.gov)

I was pleasantly surprised by the "user friendliness" of this site. There are some great lesson plans including "Beyond the Playing Field: Jackie Robinson, Civil Rights Advocate" and "Constitutional Issues—Watergate and the Constitution." This latter one was notably well-balanced. Another lesson plan focuses on Nixon's historic trip to China.

**Gerald Ford Presidential  
Library and Museum**

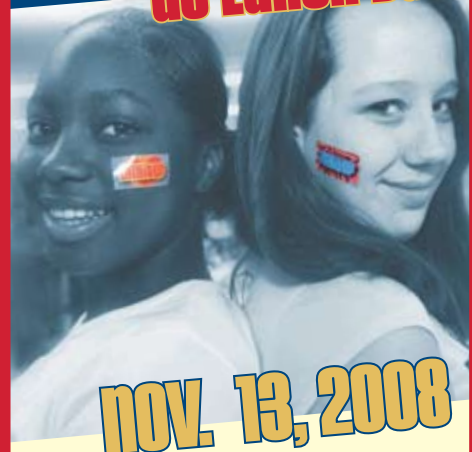
[www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/default.asp](http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/default.asp)

For some reason, the Ford Library is in Ann Arbor while the Museum is in Grand Rapids. The website, however, includes the resources of both. While there are some interesting pictures of

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Gerald and Betty Ford, this site is not particularly focused on teachers as far as providing lesson plans, simulations, or other classroom activities.

### Jimmy Carter Library and Museum

[www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov](http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov)

I've visited the Carter Library before and was very impressed with the quality of the exhibits and their focus on civil and human rights. Teachers will find a wide array of grade 6–12 lesson plans focusing on various grade levels. Some of the titles are “How Treaties Are Ratified,” “Hunger in Africa,” and “Waging Peace: The Camp David Accords.” It's a useful library for teachers and students.

### The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library Foundation

[www.reaganlibrary.com/welcome.asp](http://www.reaganlibrary.com/welcome.asp)

At first glance, the Reagan presidential library offers an excellent array of resources. The “Presidential Papers” and “Presidential Photographs” sections

are very complete. The “Education” section offers several neat-sounding programs, such as “Picturing the Presidency: President Reagan and the Cold War,” but a promised free workshop and DVD, with photographs “available upon request,” were difficult to track down.



### The George H.W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum

[bushlibrary.tamu.edu/](http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/)

The George H.W. Bush library and museum site features an “Interactive Learning Center” where hands-on programs and activities “complement the tours of all students.” Lesson plans designed to meet the Texas standards

are available as well as grade-specific lessons.

### William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum

[www.clintonlibrary.gov](http://www.clintonlibrary.gov)

The Clinton Library has a Teacher Advisory Group which meets every other month to help develop and implement plans for teachers and students. There is also a teachers' newsletter. However, there are not currently any lesson plans or student activities that can be downloaded. There is a call for any teacher who wants to help develop lesson plans to get in touch with the Library.

I wish I had more space to discuss the various sites in more detail, but I'll use the remaining space to mention a couple of websites for teachers at all grade levels that offer resources for teaching about the upcoming election. Both sites have print materials, lesson plans, and audiovisual resources. The first is Cable in the Classroom, the C-SPAN educational site for teachers ([www.ciconline.org](http://www.ciconline.org)) and the other is The PBS News Hour's “Online NewsHour Extra,” which has wonderful resources, lesson plans, and student activities for a wide variety of topics and issues. If I were still in the classroom, this would be a site that I checked daily.

If you live near a presidential library, I recommend you go and see one. Also, the Social Science Education Consortium is a relatively-new member of the larger NCSS family. It's open to teachers, teacher educators, and social scientists. We go to interesting places, learn about the area, and have some stimulating discussions. Check it out. 📖

#### Note

1. Paul Resta, Betty S. Flowers, and Ken Tothoro, “The Presidential Timeline of the 20th Century,” *Social Education* 71, no. 3 (April 2007): 115–119

**C. FREDERICK RISINGER** retired as director of professional development and coordinator of social studies education after 31 years at Indiana University, Bloomington. He currently is working on two social studies writing projects, is designing a new website, and works two shifts a week as a bartender at a local microbrewery ([www.uplandbeer.com](http://www.uplandbeer.com)).

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