

Synopsis

With Australia at war in Vietnam in 1967, suddenly Prime Minister Harold Holt disappeared without a trace—an event unparalleled in the history of western democracy. The nation was in shock and disbelief at the shattering news, hoping for a miracle for the man who famously declared it was 'all the way with LBJ'.

Police led a 'softly softly' investigation and concluded accidental drowning. But at the height of Cold War paranoia, persistent doubts about his disappearance fuelled rumour and wild speculation.

Why did Holt go into such violent surf that day? Had he chosen a bizarre way out of a difficult situation? Why were police withholding crucial facts? What had they overlooked?

Holt himself left tantalising clues that challenged the official explanation. This is the story of the Prime Minister's secret world in the months before he disappeared, a world of betrayal, blackmail, political treachery, a poisonous feud, mounting physical and mental strain, and near-death experiences.

Reconstructed from eyewitness accounts, this dramatised documentary examines the political implications of the Prime Minister's disappearance and reveals explosive new aspects of the case.

Curriculum Links

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Media Studies, SOSE/HSIE, History and Politics.

Key players

Carry out the following activities.

- From the program, and from any further research you have done, write short biographies of each of the three Australian federal politicians whose careers within the Liberal-Country Party Coalition Government during 1967 are prominently detailed during the program:
 - Harold Holt (Liberal Party)
 - William (Billy) McMahon (Liberal Party)
 - John McEwen (Country Party – renamed as the National Party in 1982)
- Carry out research on the life of the Australian Governor-General of the day, Lord Casey (Richard Gavin Gardiner Casey), then write a short commentary about his political connections to the Coalition parties in which Holt, McMahon and McEwen served.
- Write a short biography of journalist Maxwell Newton, ensuring you explain his indirect relevance to the events surrounding the disappearance of Prime Minister Holt in December 1967.
- Carry out further research if necessary, then write a short commentary on each of the following 'players' who either feature by reference, or appear during the program in either archival film or contemporary interviews (or both), explaining their significance to your understanding of the events depicted during the program:
 - Tony Eggleton (Prime Minister's press secretary)
 - Ainsley Gotto (Secretary, Chief Whip's Office)
 - Sam Holt (Harold Holt's son)
 - John Cloke (Holt's orthopaedic surgeon in Melbourne)
 - Marjorie Gillespie (Holt's Portsea neighbour)

1966–1967: historical background

By 1967 the Liberal-Country Party Coalition had been in government, federally, since 1949, and was to remain in power until 1972, the longest unbroken length of time in Australian history any political party, or coalition of parties, has ever stayed in government. Why? By 1967 were there signs from within the Coalition that its years of solidity, unity, power and rule were beginning to come to an end?

- Taking into account relevant details from the program, and further research you have carried out, discuss in class then write your own commentary on the means by which Harold Holt assumed the prime ministership in January 1966. Who did he assume the prime ministership from, and why? Was he elected unopposed by the federal members of the Coalition? Were there other, potential leaders who may have been considered to be more suitable for the position?

Did Holt have political 'enemies' within his own Liberal Party and/or the Coalition partner, the Country Party? Explain why it would have been impossible for the leader of the Country Party, John McEwen, or in fact any other federal politician in the Country Party, to have been elected prime minister in January 1966 (or any other year since 1949).

- Australian society during the 1960s may be considered to have been politically conservative in persistently returning the Coalition parties to government at every federal election, in preference to allowing the Australian Labor Party (ALP) a chance to govern for the first time since 1949. In small groups, carry out research, compiling and presenting relevant information and viewpoints, then write your own discussion on the reasons for why the Coalition remained in government during the middle and late 1960s, around the time Harold Holt was prime minister. Look at living standards, employment, available and affordable housing, and interest rates as indicators of economic and social wellbeing and affluence, and as reasons for either retaining a government in power, or replacing it by another political party. Also examine the following questions in relation to Coalition popularity:
 - By 1967 was Australia's entry into the Vietnam War in 1962 popularly accepted or not by the electorate? How does the Vietnam War relate to, or form a part of, Australia's general stance towards the Cold War and to national security?
 - Was the Coalition's introduction and development of national service (known as 'conscription', where young men from late 1964 onwards were drafted from civilian life into the Army for service in Vietnam) popular, particularly with first-time voters and others between 18 and 25 years old?
 - Was there a pronounced, organised anti-conservative, anti-government, anti-war protest movement in Australia by 1967?
 - In connection with the previous question, what was the effect of the 'Youth Revolution' of the 1960s on Coalition rule, and the influence on many people of popular music? For example, in Australia did Bob Dylan's 1962 American song, *The Times They Are a-Changin'*, genuinely express a desire throughout the social fabric for sweeping political change? Could the lyrics be considered prophetic? (See 'Bob Dylan's songs' in website references.)
 - Are the above four issues (an overseas military conflict such as the Vietnam War; national service; anti-war protests; youth revolution and the influence of popular music) likely to cause a change in government, via a federal election, if most Australians are contented with their own general living conditions and standards on a daily basis? What do you think creates a general and widespread mood or desire throughout the Australian electorate for a change in government? Did it exist at the time of Harold Holt's disappearance?
- As the program shows, in mid-1966 there was an assassination attempt on the Leader of the Opposition, Arthur Calwell, who eventually resigned from the ALP leadership in early 1967, following the November 1966 federal election. Carry out research then write a short commentary on the issues surrounding the attempt on Calwell's life. Explain whether the attempt was planned and carried out by an organised group. What were the reasons for the attempt, and how do they relate to the Cold War, the Vietnam War and the fear of the spread of communism in general? Discuss whether it is possible to interpret the assassination attempt in any way as a turning point in Australian social and political life, where no longer were public figures safe, or whether the attempt was merely a single, out-of-the-ordinary aberration of little consequence.
- Research the events surrounding Harold Holt's words to America's President Johnson in July 1966, 'All the way with LBJ'. What was meant by this comment that was entirely different from its original purpose as a slogan during Johnson's 1964 presidential election campaign? What did it indicate about the future of Australian-USA relations from then onwards, into the early 21st century? What effect did the comment have on the Australian public at the time, and how was it represented in the Australian news media? Was Holt lauded or ridiculed as a result of his comment? After considering these questions, imagine that the very next day in 1966, after hearing Holt's words, you are now writing a letter to the editor of a daily newspaper to express your opinions and your reaction to them. Write the letter in 250-300 words.
- Research and write a commentary in 300-400 words on the developments, achievements and successes of the Holt prime ministership.

Harold Holt: behind the scenes, public persona

During his prime ministership Harold Holt's public persona was of a fit, physically active man. As we see from the program, however, behind the scenes a different, more obscure version of reality emerges. Does this version contain within it the fateful elements, a potential set of causal relationships resulting inevitably in Holt's death by accidental drowning?

- From the program, and from any further research you have done, discuss in class then write your own commentary on the ways in which Harold Holt was the first Australian prime minister to use the electronic mass media of television as a means of projecting a deliberately-constructed image of himself to the Australian public. What was that image? Provide examples of both archival film and press photographs that assisted in constructing and broadcasting that image across the land. How do you think an Australian public at large would have responded to these images?
- Do you think the medium of television is used by politicians today, many decades after the 1960s, for similar purposes in constructing 'positive' images of themselves? Discuss in class, with reference to current political leaders such as the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition.
- Following from the previous activity, it may be argued that public figures such as prime ministers cannot totally control and contain all media images of themselves. Discuss in class any examples of archival film used during the program that, when examined closely, indicate an alternative image of Harold Holt that perhaps he, or his advisers, would prefer the public not to see. How might we interpret those images of Holt? Do you think there was a case at the time, when self-censorship by the mass media was more pronounced than it is today, for not screening this film to TV viewers?
- From the documentary film and any further reading you have done, in your own words write an account of the pressures and emotional strains Prime Minister Holt was under from within his own Government cabinet and his own Liberal Party. Attempt, for example, to explain the rift between William McMahon and John McEwen, and whether Holt was able to contain and deal with it satisfactorily. Was he in any genuine danger of having the prime ministership taken from him by McMahon?
- Write a commentary on whether the public had a right to be informed that one of Holt's doctors has prescribed powerful pain-killing and potentially addictive medication for him, and that on at least two occasions while swimming or skin-diving, the Prime Minister had almost drowned and had to be rescued from the water.
- Prime Minister Holt was advised by his Melbourne orthopaedic surgeon, who had prescribed the drugs, neither to play tennis nor swim in his present condition. From the film, according to Tom Frame, Holt's biographer, 'The trouble was, he was like many Australian men, ignored the doctor, I'm invincible, I'll do whatever I like'. Use this general situation and attitude to draft a short fiction story about a so-called 'invincible' Aussie male. The story may be presented in serious, dramatic mode, or as a comedy-satire. Also consider the narrative viewpoint and themes. Will the story, for example, be narrated by the main protagonist himself, or from the viewpoint of a family member, a work colleague? Could the protagonist already be deceased, telling the story in flashback?
- Discuss in class then write your own opinions about whether you think the actual or rumoured extra-marital sexual affairs of a public figure such as Holt should be reported and discussed in the news media, or ignored and suppressed even when the information is common knowledge among journalists. Is it hypocritical of journalists to report on any of these issues relating to well-known public figures, when the private behaviour and actions of other citizens (including, perhaps, journalists themselves) may be identical?
- Discuss in class whether you think that vision of a politician tripping over, or being bitten by a dog on a 'meet and greet in the street', screened on the evening TV news, on current affairs programs or during political satire-comedy programs, is more likely to evoke ridicule and contempt rather than sympathy from the viewing audience. Could it even be considered as news? Do you think that such scenes should be self-censored by TV channels, and not screened at all?
- Following from the previous activity, in pairs or in small groups devise and write the dialogue for a discussion amongst a news editorial group, arguing about the ethical and newsworthy considerations of running a story in a newspaper or on television, complete with 'incriminating' photographs or video, about a politician caught in an embarrassing or compromising position. For example, the discussion may extend further than whether to present the story; it may develop into a dialogue about why and how best to present it.

The police investigation

The program argues that the police investigation into the disappearance of Prime Minister Harold Holt was incomplete, not so much in that it eventually returned a finding of accidental death by drowning, which may be correct in itself, but that the range of issues that may have contributed directly or indirectly to the drowning were not sufficiently investigated, or even ignored. The overriding problem in arriving at a conclusive finding, in terms of, for example, *post mortem* examinations of the corpse, was that there was not a corpse to examine.

