

Vietnam War Protest: Primary Documents

NCSS Thematic Strand: Time, Continuity, and Change

Grades: 9-12

Time Outline: 1-2 50 minute periods

Background and Purpose

In this lesson, students will use 6 different primary sources from the Vietnam War era that were part of the protest movement or led to further protest. The Vietnam War divided the nation into those who supported the war (Hawks) and those who were against the war (Doves). Yet there was still a 'middle' group of people that thought the war was going poorly but weren't sure how the U.S. should act. This 'silent majority,' as Nixon would later define them, was greatly influenced by the protest movements and popular media around them. After the news and media's response to the Tet Offensive in 1968, protest movements grew in popularity. Other events such as the My Lai massacre and Kent State shootings further eroded support for the war.

The purpose of this lesson is to help students understand the complex reasons and responses for protesting the Vietnam War. Based on personal experience, I feel it is easy for students to simply say that people protested the war and just move on without serious contemplation. Reasons for protesting the Vietnam War greatly reflected the social, economic, and political conditions of the 1960's and 1970's. For example, by studying quotes by African Americans, students will see how demands for civil liberties and freedom from discrimination greatly affected the African American experience for both soldiers and citizens in the U.S.

Objectives & Student Outcomes:

Students will:

- ❖ Use primary sources to understand how we learn about the past and how we evaluate the reliability and importance of varying historical interpretations and sources
- ❖ Read, describe, and teach the class about a specific group, event, or person who protested the Vietnam War.

- ❖ Read and interpret the many reasons why specific people and groups protested the war.
- ❖ Practice presentation skills as each small group will briefly teach the class about their primary document

Materials:

- ❖ 4-5 copies of Bob Dylan's "Master of War" with introduction
- ❖ 4-5 copies of Kent State reading with primary pictures.
- ❖ 4-5 copies of Muhammad Ali's quotes against the war.
- ❖ 4-5 copies of My Lai Massacre reading from Larry Colburn, "They Were Butchering People" (2003)
- ❖ 4-5 copies of Ton Hayden's Students for a Democratic society reading.
- ❖ 4-5 copies of *History Alive: African American Experience* reading (Not Included)
- ❖ 1 copy for each student of the note taking table.
- ❖ ELMO document projector or overhead projector.

Procedures

Procedure 1: Introduction

Discuss with students how the Vietnam War led to a great deal of public protest in the U.S. Remind students that some protests were due to the conditions of war in general (SDS) and some were based on specific events such as the invasion of Cambodia. While there is no one right answer for why the U.S. lost the war in Vietnam, many people at the time and historians today claim that the growing unrest at home gradually undercut support for the war and led to the withdraw of troops during the Nixon era.

Procedure 2: Instructions

Inform students that they will be split into 6 groups (each group gets one primary source) and that they will read primary source accounts of people, events, or groups that turned popular support of the war. Project the note taking table via the ELMO and explain that students are to first read the background and fill in the first box before reading the primary document.

After reading the background, groups are to discuss and take notes in the second box. Students should include 3-4 arguments against the war based on their primary source.

Inform students that after about 15 minutes of group time they will present their notes and primary documents to the class as if they were “experts on the reading.”

Procedure 3: Group reading and note time

Allow students to split into six different groups (or assign them to specific groups). Give each group a couple of copies of one primary source reading. As each group is working, circulate the room and provide assistance where needed. With about 2-3 minutes left, ask each group a few questions on the reading to make sure they are ready to go.

Procedure 4: Start mini-presentations

Before having each group present their information, remind the class that they should work on good presentation skills:

- ❖ Introduce your topic and reading
- ❖ Summarize your notes; don't just read them
- ❖ While other groups are going, you should be listening and filling out the rest of your table.

If certain groups struggle, ask guiding questions or add extra information you deem important.

Procedure 5: Review

At the end of class, but most likely the next day, briefly review the six primary sources and check for understanding. At the end of the review, walk around and give credit for students who completed the notes.

Assessment

Students will:

- ❖ Complete a graphic organizer/ note taking guide for each primary document
- ❖ Students will use note taking guide to review for the summative test

Extensions and Adaptations

Originally, I had thought about creating 'stations' with a laptop computer at each station to encourage further research on the primary document. For some of the stations, I had planned to have songs or websites already up on the laptop.

If time permits, students could also use their note taking guide to write an opinion paragraph on the impact of these people and events on the Vietnam War.

Resources

Zinn, Howard & Anthony Arnove. *Voices of a People's History of the United States*. New York: New York. Seven Stories Press, 2004.

TCI, History Alive supplemental Teaching Material.

Handout: Bob Dylan's "Master of War" with Introduction

Popular Media and the War

The antiwar protesters gained a powerful ally as the war continued on – the mass media. Television especially played an important role in molding public opinion. Satellite technology meant that the war could be broadcast at home almost as it happened. The scenes of brutal fighting, desperate refugees, and dying United States soldiers shocked the more than 60 million American who tuned in to the nightly news.

During the early years of the war, most reporters agreed that the United States was fighting the spread of Communism and that South Vietnam deserved and needed American support. They applauded South Vietnamese leader Diem. In June 1960, *Newsweek* called him "one of Asia's ablest leaders."

However, after the Tet offensive in early 1968 respected reporters such as Walter Cronkite began to raise serious questions about the war. Reporters not only questioned official reports that the war could be won, but also raised more fundamental questions: Should the United States be in Vietnam?

Music also reflected these critical questions. War critics such as Bob Dylan argued that the war was not to prevent the spread of communism, but rather for big businesses to make profits.

Bob Dylan enabled artists to write more about their innermost feelings than about cars and love. Many bands after Dylan made remakes of his songs. Peter, Paul, and Mary remade the Dylan song "Blowing in the Wind" and it soon became a hit for them.

Bob Dylan became famous at about the same time as the civil rights movement in the 1960's. At this time he introduced a new style of lyrics that would remain around forever. "Open your ears, and you're influenced" (Bob Dylan). Bob Dylan didn't just come into the music world by himself. He was also influenced by other musicians. Woody Guthrie was a major influence on Dylan. "he sat by the bedside of the dying Woody Guthrie" (Cohn, Nik. *Rock From The Beginning*). Joan Baez made many of Dylan's songs popular before Dylan himself became popular. In his early career Dylan worked with Joan Baez, who was also against the Vietnam War. Baez was one of the most significant female folk singers of the 1960's.

Bob Dylan's "Master of War"

Come you masters of war
You that build all the guns
You that build the death planes
You that build all the bombs
You that hide behind walls
You that hide behind desks
I just want you to know
I can see through your masks.

You that never done nothin'
But build to destroy
You play with my world
Like it's your little toy
You put a gun in my hand
And you hide from my eyes
And you turn and run farther
When the fast bullets fly.

Like Judas of old
You lie and deceive
A world war can be won
You want me to believe
But I see through your eyes
And I see through your brain
Like I see through the water
That runs down my drain.

You fasten all the triggers
For the others to fire
Then you set back and watch
When the death count gets higher
You hide in your mansion'
As young people's blood
Flows out of their bodies
And is buried in the mud.

You've thrown the worst fear
That can ever be hurled
Fear to bring children

Into the world
For threatening my baby
Unborn and unnamed
You ain't worth the blood
That runs in your veins.

How much do I know
To talk out of turn
You might say that I'm young
You might say I'm unlearned
That even Jesus would never
Forgive what you do.

Let me ask you one question
Is your money that good
Will it buy you forgiveness
Do you think that it could
I think you will find
When your death takes its toll
All the money you made
Will never buy back your soul.

And I hope that you die
And your death'll come soon
I will follow your casket
In the pale afternoon
And I'll watch while you're lowered
Down to your deathbed
And I'll stand over your grave
'Til I'm sure that you're dead.

Handout: Kent State reading with primary pictures

Kent State Shooting

In 1970 the United States was in what the President's Commission on Campus Unrest later would call its most divisive period since the Civil War. The Vietnam War, stalemated after five years of intense U.S. ground combat, was the target of increasingly aggressive, sometimes violent protests. When Nixon announced the Cambodia invasion on April 30, campuses erupted.

In Kent, some students rioted outside the bars downtown the following night, a Friday. Saturday night protesters set fire to the ROTC building and slashed firemen's hoses. Even before that, Gov. James Rhodes, a Republican, called out the Ohio National Guard. He called the protesters "the worst type of people that we harbor in America," and said "[w]e are going to eradicate the problem. We are not going to treat the symptoms."

On Monday several hundred students gathered on the campus commons to rally against the war and the Guard's presence. The soldiers used tear gas to move the students off the commons, followed them up and over a small hill, and formed ranks in a practice football field. A standoff ensued. Students kept their distance, chanting slogans — "Pigs off campus!" — and hurling rocks and bottles, a few of which reached their targets. Then the Guardsmen retraced their steps up the hill, heading back toward the commons.

The crowd had swelled to several thousand, including protest supporters, observers and bystanders. Many of them now relaxed; the confrontation seemed over. "It was OK until they got up on that hill," Vecchio recalls.

Suddenly, about 12 Guardsmen turned 130 degrees, raised their rifles and fired. "I heard the shots," Vecchio says, "and kissed the ground." In 12.53 seconds, 28 Guardsmen got off 61 to 67 shots. (Some fired into the ground or the air; 48 Guardsmen did not shoot at all, according to the FBI.) Vecchio found Jeff Miller, whom she'd gotten to know over the past few days, bleeding to death. There was nothing she could do. She screamed, "Oh my God!" Also killed: protester Allison Krause; Bill Schroeder, an ROTC student who'd been watching the protest and was shot in the back; and Sandy Scheuer, who was walking to class.

Nine students were wounded. One, Dean Kahler, was shot in the back as he lay on the ground. The bullet left him paralyzed for life. Another, Alan Canfora, ducked behind an oak tree as a bullet passed through his right wrist. Canfora says today that after the Cambodia invasion, "We wanted to bring the war home. But we never expected that."

The shootings provoked America's first national student strike, closing hundreds of campuses, and inspired an anti-war anthem — Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young's *Ohio*, which asked, "What if you knew her/and found her dead on the ground?" *Newsweek* put the photo of Vecchio on its cover under the headline "Nixon's Home Front."

A Gallup Poll found that only 11% of Americans faulted the Guard; 58% thought the demonstrators were partly responsible for the carnage. Based on an FBI investigation, the Justice Department concluded that the Guardsmen were never in danger and that their explanation — they were surrounded, outnumbered and fired in self-defense — was a fabrication. Later that year, a presidential commission called the shootings "unnecessary, unwarranted, and inexcusable."

Primary Source pictures





Handout: Muhammad Ali against the War

Muhammad Ali and a divided nation

By 1967 the United States was deeply divided over the war. **Hawks**, those who supported the war, urged stepping up the war effort to win a military victory. **Doves**, those who supported the withdrawal of United States troops and a negotiated end to the war, questioned both the cost and morality of the war.

Many Americans were neither Hawks nor Doves but were disturbed both by the war and the protests against it. A December 1967 poll showed that 70 percent of Americans believed the protests were “acts of disloyalty” to the soldiers fighting the war. However, as the war raged on many became convinced that the United States was hopelessly bogged down in an unwinnable war. That frustration could be heard in the words of one Iowa homemaker. “I want to get out, but I don’t want to give up.”

In 1964, shortly after becoming the world heavyweight boxing champion, the boxer Cassius Marcellus Clay (named after a white abolitionist by that name) took the name Muhammad Ali, renouncing what he called his slave name. Two years later, the outspoken fighter caused outrage in the media when he petitioned for exemption from military service in Vietnam and then, when denied, refused to be drafted. As a result of his protest against the war, Ali’s title was revoked and he was sentenced to a five-year prison term. Ali’s battle against the sentence went to the U.S. Supreme Court and was not reversed until 1971. In 1966, Ali spoke in Louisville, Kentucky, his home town, about the reasons for not fighting in Vietnam.

Ali’s refusal sparked a national uproar, and virtually every state and local entity canceled his boxing license. Ali did not fight for two and a half years. He was stripped of his championship title, and his passport was confiscated. He lost an initial court battle and faced a five-year prison term. Ali became the first national figure to speak out against the war in Vietnam.

Muhammad Ali Quote:

“Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go ten thousand miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs and denied simple human rights? No, I am not going ten thousand miles from home to help murder and burn another poor nation simply to continue the domination of white slave masters of the darker people the world over. This is the day when such evils must come to an end. I have been warned that to take such a stand would put my prestige in jeopardy and could cause me to lose millions of dollars which should accrue to me as the champion. But I have said it once and I will say it again. The real enemy of my people is right here. I will not disgrace my

religion, my people or myself by becoming a tool to enslave those who are fighting for their own justice, freedom and equality. . . .

If I thought the war was going to bring freedom and equality to twenty-two million of my people they wouldn't have to draft me, I'd join tomorrow. But I either have to obey the laws of the land or the laws of Allah. I have nothing to lose by standing up for my beliefs. So I'll go to jail. We've been in jail for four hundred years."

1966 Sports Illustrated article on the public's response to Ali

"The governor of Illinois found Clay "disgusting." and the governor of Maine said Clay "should be held in utter contempt by every patriotic American." An American Legion post in Miami asked people to "join in condemnation of this unpatriotic, loudmouthed, bombastic individual," and dirty mail began to arrive at Clay's Miami address."

Handout: My Lai massacre changes opinions back home

On March 16, 1968, a company of U.S. infantry entered the village of My Lai, and although they did not receive a single round of hostile fire, methodically slaughtered some five hundred Vietnamese peasants, mostly women and children. The freelance journalist Seymour Hersh heard the story, but the major media ignored his efforts to publicize it. Finally, in December 1969, Life magazine carried Ronald Haeberle's horrendous photos of GIs pouring automatic rifle fire into trenches where Vietnamese women, babies in their arms, crouched in fear. The military arrested Lieutenant William Calley, a platoon leader at My Lai, who had ordered the shootings. Many officers were involved in the incident and then the cover-up. However, only Calley received a jail sentence. His life sentence was reduced to five years by the intervention of President Nixon. He served three and a half years under house arrest and was then released. In the following recollection, Larry Colburn, a helicopter door-gunner, who, with his pilot, Hugh Thompson, came upon the scene and stopped some of the killing, tells his story.

How would this event change public opinion in the U.S?

Should Lt. Calley have received a stronger punishment?

Larry Colburn, "They Were Butchering People" (2003)

We weren't pacifists. We did our job and when we had to kill people we did. But we didn't do it for sport. We didn't randomly shoot people. In our gun company it was very important to capture weapons, not just to legitimize your kill, but psychologically it was easier when you could say, "If I didn't do that, he was going to shoot me."

We flew an OH-23-a little gasoline-engine bubble helicopter. We were aerial scouts-a new concept. Instead of just sending assault helicopters they'd use our small aircraft as bait and have a couple gunships cover us. Basically we'd go out and try to get into trouble. We'd fly real low and if we encountered anything we'd mark it with smoke, return fire, and let the gunships work out. We also went on "snatch missions," kidnapping draft-age males to take back for interrogation. We did that a lot in 1968.

After that we just started working the perimeter of My Lai-4, -5, and -6 and I remember seeing the American troops come in on slicks [helicopters]. We got ahead of them to see if they were going to encounter anything and we still didn't receive any fire. It was market day and we saw a lot of women and children leaving the hamlet. They were moving down the road carrying empty baskets. As we went further around the perimeter we saw a few wounded women in the rice fields south of My Lai-4. We marked their bodies with smoke grenades expecting that medics would give them medical assistance.

When we came back to the road we started seeing bodies, the same people that were walking to the market. They hadn't even gotten off the road. They were in piles, dead. We started going through all the scenarios of what might have happened. Was it artillery? Gunships? Viet Cong? The American soldiers on the ground were just walking around in a real nonchalant sweep. No one was crouching, ducking, or hiding.

The only thing I remember feeling back then was that these guys were really out for revenge. They'd lost men to booby traps and snipers and they were ready to engage. They were briefed the night before and I've heard it said that they were going in there to waste everything. They didn't capture any weapons. They didn't kill any draft-age males. I've seen the list of dead and there were a hundred and twenty some humans under the age of five. It's something I've struggled with my whole adult life, how people can do that. I know what it's like to seek revenge, but we would look for a worthy opponent. These were elders, mothers, children, and babies. The fact that the VC [Viet Cong] camped out there at night is no justification for killing everyone in the hamlet.

Compare it to a little town in the United States. We're at war with someone on our own soil. They come into a town and rape the women, kill the babies, kill everyone. How would we feel? And it wasn't just murdering civilians. They were butchering people. The only thing they didn't do is cook 'em and eat 'em. How do you get that far over the edge?

Handout: Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)

At first SDS tackled domestic issues. In the summer of 1964, SDS volunteers moved into poor urban neighborhoods and organized residents to fight for jobs, better housing, schools, and community services.

By the fall of 1964, SDS had organized chapters on nearly 50 campuses around the country. Then a new issue loomed—the war in Vietnam. At its December 1964 national convention, SDS members voted to protest the war by organizing a march on Washington for the following April. Because United States involvement in Vietnam was still limited to military advisers and aid, opposition to the war remained muted. No one expected more than a few thousand marchers. Then President Johnson began to escalate the United States commitment to South Vietnam.

When Johnson ordered the large-scale bombing of North Vietnam in 1965 and sent in the first combat troops, the antiwar movement mushroomed. Some Americans felt betrayed by Johnson, whom they had considered a peace candidate in 1964. SDS now led a crusade to end the war in Vietnam. Within a single year, the ranks of SDS had swollen to more than 150 chapters with 10,000 members.

That spring (1965) also helped organize several university teach-ins. The first teach-ins took place at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. On March 24, 1965. Shortly after the first United States ground combat troops landed in South Vietnam, more than 3,500 students and professors jammed into 4 lecture halls. They sang folk songs, analyzed United States foreign policy, and debated the war until dawn. In the following weeks, similar teach-ins sprang up at campuses across the nation.

Tom Hayden outlines the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) views on the ills of society.

American society is being destroyed by its unrepresentative government. The politicians who control the White House and Congress do not respond to glaring social needs or to the outcries of millions of people. Democracy is reduced to the sorry event of people trooping to the polls every four years to vote for candidates who offer no serious choice.

Our taxes, blood and national honor are being poured out in the hopeless Vietnam war, while the violence in our cities exposes the real depth of our unsolved problems at home. Faced with a world wide cry for human rights, from Vietnam to our nation's slums, top American politicians seem able to reply only with negative and self-

defeating violence. But the violence of suppression solves nothing. The problems cannot be avoided or bombed away.

In 1960 and especially in 1964, the American voters supported peace in Vietnam and social reform at home. Since then leading scholars, religious figures, artists, even certain generals and businessmen have protested the war; the Senate leadership of both parties has criticised the President; opinion surveys show a large minority opposed to the fighting; nearly all of America's allies have registered their opposition; world public opinion condemns the US as the aggressor in Vietnam. Yet the warmakers continue to escalate. Their domination of policy grows.

For a century American society has endorsed racial equality. But in 1968 a virtual race war is in the making. Since open rebellions broke out nearly four years ago, no social and economic answer has been put forward. The basic response of the government has been to violently suppress the rebellions then let evil conditions go on as before. Rotten housing, schools and jobs are the continuous lot of black Americans. Neither hard work in the cotton fields, nor politics, nor labor organizations, nor nonviolent demonstrations have made the American promise become a reality.

The problems of Vietnam and racism affect all Americans. Our country's future peace and honor depend on a successful resolution of these two problems. Hatreds and divisions are being created which will take generations to end. America is becoming an ugly and insecure place to live. The country lacks the commitment to deal with racism, and cannot afford to anyway because of its preoccupation with Vietnam. Because our social imagination is blighted by these investments in violence, our life as a whole is degraded in countless ways. Cities are unlivable. Television is a wasteland. Medical needs are not met. Mental problems go unattended.

Protest Primary Documents

Name: _____

In the table below, describe the background (*italics*) of the reading in 3 or 4 main points. In the second box, outline the arguments against the war. Your group will be responsible for presenting the information on one source to the rest of the class.

Name of Primary Source	Description and background information on the person or group	Describe 3-4 major arguments against the war
African Americans		
Popular media and the War: Bob Dylan "Masters of War"		
Muhammad Ali and a divided nation		

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Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)		
My Lai Massacre		
Kent State shooting		

In the table below, describe the background (*italics*) of the reading in 3 or 4 main points. In the second box, outline the arguments against the war. Your group will be responsible for presenting the information on one source to the rest of the class.

Name of Primary Source	Description and background information on the person or group	Describe 3-4 major arguments against the war
African Americans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11% of general population, yet 20% of frontline combat forces were African American: overrepresented in military. • Civil Rights movement was still going on back home so many felt that they were fighting for nothing back home 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should be fighting for freedoms at home (Civil Rights movement) and not fighting in pointless war of Vietnam • Faced discrimination in the army.
Popular media and the War: Bob Dylan "Masters of War"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Television changed people's perception of war: they brought images of death and destruction to American's 'living room' • First 'living room war' • Music was also key to protest movement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bob Dylan argued that the only reason we were fighting Vietnam war was so big businesses could make money off of selling arms and missiles. • Politicians who get us into war are not usually the ones who are fighting and suffering in war.
Muhammad Ali and a divided nation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resisted being drafted • Boxing licenses and heavy weight boxing title revoked. • Tried to gain 'conscientious objector' deferment from draft • Hawks= support war • Doves = against war 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ali argued African Americans weren't treated well back home so why should they fight for the U.S. • Was Muslim and claimed religion prevented him from killing anyone in war. • Public ridiculed Ali as being 'un-American'

Name of Primary Source	Description and background information on the person or group	Describe 3-4 major arguments against the war
Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College student group first focused on domestic issues • Protested via march on Washington • Felt betrayed by Johnson because they thought he was a 'Peace Candidate' • Held 'Teach-ins' to inform people about the war. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Felt government did not represent the people very well. • Felt Vietnam was hopeless • Vietnam was wasting money that should be used at home. • Two problems: Vietnam and Race at home
My Lai Massacre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. battalion marched into village of My Lai and shot and killed 500 peasants • Many were unarmed women and children. • Attack was unprovoked. • Lieutenant Calley: Faced life in prison; reduced to 5 years by Nixon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. public had a hard time supporting a war that let to such atrocities as this one. • Took media one year to fully publicize the event. • First-hand accounts felt soldiers were out for revenge.
Kent State shooting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protest at college in Ohio • Protest moved to bars the first night; protest got carried away and burned down ROTC building. • National Guard called in • Final day of protest, Guards opened fire on protesters. 9 wounded, 4 killed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most of the U.S. public blamed the rowdy protestors even though they were unarmed. • U.S. public upset that war in Vietnam was leading to such violence at home.