The Vietnam War:  
Primary Sources and Activities  
Supported by the Library of Congress  
Teaching with Primary Sources program

The Vietnam War was a conflict that spanned almost two decades, and was ultimately a failure for the United States. More than 58,000 Americans and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese died in the war. Conflicting public opinions about the war and the harrowing experiences of veterans make this war a still-controversial topic.

Some U.S. history courses may not have enough time to cover Vietnam in depth, or spend as much time dissecting the war as they did World War II. But Vietnam was a defining event of a generation, taking place during a time of much social reform and intense fights for civil and human rights. United States involvement in Vietnam extended over the administrations of five presidents – Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Ford – and had monumental impacts on American soldiers, citizens, politics and society in general.

Such a long, pivotal event in American history cannot be thoroughly covered in a few class periods, but can often be taught in conjunction with other subjects related to the Civil Rights Movement and the Cold War. If teachers have a few days to devote to the Vietnam War, there are many avenues to take, with possible emphasis on the geography, veterans’ experiences, politics, protest movements, strategies and battles, and impact on post-war America.

Library of Congress Resources

The Library of Congress has some resources to aid in the teaching of the Vietnam War. Many of these resources are not organized into specific collections, but can be found through careful searching of the site. Search for “Vietnam,” “Vietnam War,” “Vietnam draft,” or “Vietnam memorial.”

- **Prints and Photographs Division.** [http://www.loc.gov/pictures/](http://www.loc.gov/pictures/)
- **The Hannah Arendt Papers.** [http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/arendthtml/arendthome.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/arendthtml/arendthome.html)
- **Veterans History Project.** [http://www.loc.gov/vets/](http://www.loc.gov/vets/)
Vietnam War Primary-Source Set: Sources and Activities

This primary source set is a first step in harnessing some of the Vietnam War sources from various places on the Library of Congress website. This set collects and organizes the sources into three in-class activities for high school students, to teach about three particular elements of the war:

- **The Geography of Vietnam**
- **Vietnam Veterans’ Experiences**
- **Words of Vietnam-Era Presidents**

The sources and activities here provide teachers with activity suggestions that can occupy one class period or less. The inclusion of one Minnesota source helps to make the connection between state and national history, illustrating that events on the national stage also played out in Minnesota. Library of Congress sources include:

- Franklin D. Roosevelt Inaugural Address, 1945.

Minnesota sources (from the Minnesota Historical Society) include:

The Vietnam War: Context

The South Vietnamese, aided by the United States, fought against North Vietnam after the departure of French occupation in the early 1950s. The United States justified involvement in the war as a means of supporting the non-communist South Vietnam, part of its policy of Communism containment.

In the early 1960s, President Kennedy sent U.S. troops to Vietnam to train South Vietnamese soldiers in guerilla warfare and act as advisers to the government, in order to halt the spread of communism moving in from North Vietnam. South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem grew in unpopularity, however, partly due to his repression of Buddhism, and was assassinated in 1963 by the South Vietnamese Army.

Following a North Vietnamese attack on a U.S. ship in 1964, the U.S. Congress granted President Johnson the power to conduct military operations in Vietnam. The United States launched its first aerial attack against the North Vietnamese Army, also called Viet Cong, in 1965. Between 1964 and 1969, the number of American troops in Vietnam increased from 16,000 to 553,000. The U.S. government used a draft lottery system beginning in 1969.

Throughout the 1960s, the U.S. government and military assured the American public that victory in Vietnam was just around the corner. After the Tet Offensive in January 1968, American media and the public began to recognize that the war was at an impasse. Support dwindled, and protests exploded across the United States.

When President Nixon took office in 1969, he advocated a policy of “Vietnamization,” which would equip the South Vietnamese with the tools necessary to defend themselves, allowing the United States to withdraw. China and the Soviet Union, however, continued their support of fellow communist nation North Vietnam, providing them with weaponry that enabled their continued warfare against South Vietnam.

Ultimately, the United States continued official involvement in Vietnam until January 1973, when the Paris Peace Accords were signed. The United States withdrew its troops and exchanged prisoners of war. In 1975, South Vietnam surrendered to and merged with North Vietnam.

The failure of the Vietnam war created an atmosphere of frustration and distrust among the American people, agitated by the release of the Pentagon Papers in 1971. American troops returned home to a country that was bitter about the war, and many of them did not receive the support they needed.

Minnesota Involvement in the Vietnam War

More than 68,000 Minnesotans served in the Vietnam War, including many women who served as nurses. Of those, almost 1,100 died and 43 were missing in action. In 1992, the Minnesota Vietnam Veterans Memorial was completed on the grounds of the State Capitol building to honor those who served but did not return.
The Geography of Vietnam

**Library of Congress documents for this activity:**


Vietnam demarcation line and demilitarized zone, 1966. [http://www.loc.gov/item/75690898](http://www.loc.gov/item/75690898)


Cambodia, South Vietnam, 1970. [http://www.loc.gov/item/gm%2070004427](http://www.loc.gov/item/gm%2070004427)

South Vietnam population and administrative divisions, 1972. [http://www.loc.gov/item/75690894](http://www.loc.gov/item/75690894)

**Activity Procedure:**

Understanding the geography of war is essential to understanding the war. If students are not familiar with the geographic locations of the nations at war, as well as political boundaries and other features, it is more difficult to visualize the war that took place. These maps will help provide a foundation for future discussions of the Vietnam War, the locations of critical events, and the involvement of surrounding nations.

1. If possible, enlarge the 2001 map to poster size and hang it at the front of the room. Talk about the features of the modern map and get students oriented to the shape of Vietnam and the surrounding countries. (You may want to show a map of the world, too, to orient students to the location of Vietnam).

2. Divide the students into small groups and give each group one of the other four maps – either enlarged to poster size or on the Library of Congress website so they can zoom in and out – and a stack of Post-It notes. (For best effect, assign a different color Post-It note to each map).

3. Have students examine their individual maps and make notes about what the map portrays, especially in regards to boundaries, roads, populations, cities and cultural identification. In addition, have them make notes about any specific differences they see between their map and the large 2001 map.

4. After the students have examined the maps more closely, have them make notes on the Post-Its about some of the identifying features that stand out on their map (for example: the map of South Vietnam population and divisions labels the capitol of the country as Saigon, whereas on the 2001 map, it is no longer a capitol and is called Ho Chi Minh City). All groups should place the Post-It notes on the appropriate places on the large map.

5. Come back together as a large group and talk about what the Post-It notes reveal. Students from smaller groups should talk in general about their maps and explain their Post-It choices.
Vietnam Veterans’ Experiences

Minnesota documents for this activity:


Library of Congress documents for this activity:


Activity Procedure:

The Vietnam War, fought between the North Vietnamese, and the United States (with the aid of the South Vietnamese) lasted officially more than 15 years, although U.S. ground troops were present in Vietnam from 1964-1973. The experiences of Vietnam War veterans vary widely, as do their views of the war and their reception by the U.S. public. The Library of Congress Veterans History Project has hundreds of stories of Vietnam veterans chronicling their varied experiences. Reading the first-person interviews will provide a personal, emotional look at the years of war.

1. As a class, read Michael Traynor’s account of his Vietnam experience, “The Reception Home.” Talk about students’ reactions to this story. How would they characterize Traynor’s experience?
2. Divide students into four groups and assign each group a veteran’s story from the list above. Have each group read their story out loud and then discuss their veteran’s experience of war. What was the veteran’s impression of war? What is the main point of their reminiscence?
3. In each group, have the students brainstorm three words or phrases that they think describe their veteran’s war experience. Next, the group should choose one sentence that they think most powerfully describes their veteran’s memories.
4. Come back together as a class. Each group will take turns introducing their veteran: name, occupation (if known), basic understanding of the veteran’s experience, the three words and phrases, and the quote.
5. As a class, discuss the students’ impressions of these stories. Do these veteran’s experiences confirm or change their previous thoughts about Vietnam veterans? What do these stories express about the differences and similarities in veterans’ experiences? How do you feel toward these veterans? The U.S. government? Those the soldiers fought against?
6. As an extension: Each student will go into the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress and find a veteran’s story that interests them, and then perform this same exercise with that veteran. The students will document their findings and turn those in for assessment.
Coming home was really hard. That was probably the worst part. We were all so happy to come home. When that plane took off in Vietnam, the cheers and the roars inside the plane was almost deafening, because we were so happy to be getting out of there and going home. Going back to the world, that’s what we called it. Vietnam was Vietnam, or Vietnam Republic of. We were going back to the world.... When we got back to the good old USA we knew we were safe. We found out how unsafe we really were. The protesters, or the people would spit on us. The people that said whatever we got over there, we deserved it, for being over there. It was just total lack of respect.

When I got home, my wife (now ex) told me that she didn’t want to hear anything about it. And I was literally choking trying to talk to somebody but nobody wanted to hear it... it was not a popular war, it was also not a war that we were winning. We won WW2, WW1, we always won. Vietnam we did not win, it was not popular. So we weren’t afforded the same courtesy as any other Vet. Even Korean Veterans had said the same thing. They were told the same thing. It was a police action not a war.

Other 1968 Reflections (from the 1968 Exhibit, Minnesota Historical Society):

Larry Schwab

...I was drafted and reported in early September and army field service school lasted approximately five weeks. And after that time I think we had eight or ten days of ordinary leave. So my wife and I drove back from San Antonio to Morgantown, [WV] and I spent that short one week or less time with my family and then I simply got on a plane and flew to San Francisco, and reported at Oakland Army base and waited for four days until there was a commercial aircraft that took us to Vietnam. But it was a wrench to leave everything that you had come to expect and to be forced by my country, my nation, my culture to enter a conflict which was violating what I thought were basic human principles. So it was a difficult transition. And especially when you are thrust into the maul, into the unknown and you know that people are dying and being maimed in that conflict already. And you wonder about your own safety. And of course when you get on a plane and leave American soil to fly there, you wonder if you'll come back alive or if you arrive in a steel box like a lot of the soldiers that I served beside did. Or they may have gone home through a system maimed without limbs or with serious injuries through medical evacuation system through Southeast Asia or Japan. So those questions are always on your mind when you enter such a violent event as the American Vietnam War turned out to be...

...The worst four hours of my life, that I'm still having nightmares about and combat dreams. But never once did anyone think that their doing this to get an award, or a medal. What you're trying to do is survive and in my case I was trying to take care of nineteen-year-old kids that had been maimed and were missing limbs and had 90% second and third degree bums and the soldiers aren't thinking of country and the flag at that time either. They wanted something for pain, and they wanted water and they wanted their mothers. And the pathos of bombs and exploding rockets, and small arms fire, to nineteen-year-old kids; it pure pathos to think that I heard that, and I saw that, and but it wasn't country and liberty and freedom and democracy hear most of these kids die that they were there for. They weren't fighting for that. They were fighting to stay alive and to come home. And that's why I have real issue with that as a political slogan that these men died for their country. They didn't die for their country, they died for each other maybe, but they didn't want to die. But no soldier that I saw seriously injured or maimed or thought he might die, ever said the first thing about the flag or the country. They were thinking of their families. And the majority of the ones that I saw there in that situation were drafted. And it since you can consider extended that logic that our own culture and political system sent them off to their deaths unwillingly because they were conscripted and forced to serve and they put them in harm’s way.

Full transcript and digital resources:

http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.23979/
Rhona Marie Knox Prescott

When we came down it was daylight; Vietnam from the air is gorgeous. It is all green like Ireland, all shades of green. You can see the divisions of the rice paddies separated by hand made dikes. It is very hilly and fertile and of course it has the sea all around it. It was gorgeous coming down...

...When I came down it radically changed. We were not allowed to disembark right away from the airplane. We were told to put on our helmets and to run single file to a site on the tarmac- to go as quickly as possible and not to look back. When the doors opened the heat just kind of hit us in the face. It was really hot in Vietnam; it was close to one hundred thirty degrees. We were being fired at; there were snipers there along the runway; somewhere in the bushes— that they hadn't been able to remove. We were just to run, so that we did. Nobody got shot. It was a real eye-opener! ...

...The hospital was a series of tents; big green tents held up by poles with stakes into the ground. The floor was a tent liner which was just a kind of plastic and canvas material that sat on the ground that was lumpy. There was of course no air conditioning, the tent flaps were left open. It was hot. The First Calvary had a helicopter unit. There were a lot of helicopters flying over which pulled up with their rotors a lot more of the dusty clay. So, it was not only hot, it was really dirty; there was just dirt flying all the time and it was hotter than Hades during the day and it got really cold at night....

...It wasn't really safe. The stuff was old. Since I was acting chief nurse I decided that the casualties would all just go into the receiving tent where there was more room and more tables and where the doctors posted themselves. That tent became our surgery. It was beyond primitive; it was beyond the MASH movie and TV show. It was dirty; it was a non-sterile environment. We didn't have enough instruments. We didn't have enough hands. Needless to say we shared things during surgical procedures that were absolutely needed to save lives, but they weren't sterile. We didn't have suction, we didn't have penicillin to irrigate wounds, didn't have enough blood to transfuse, we just didn't have... We did have so many casualties right out of the field. They just brought them all in there. The First Cav. put their people in that staging unit hoping that we could fix them and send them back into the war. So, we were [sigh] way above our heads...

...When we were busy (which was most of the time) you had to some how block out the smells and the sounds because the smells were of dirty, putrefied flesh and blood that was some running free and some that was old. There were insects and there was dust and other organic material that didn't smell good in the area. The sounds were of people crying and screaming and praying and then there were people on our own staff who were also pretty flustered and uttering back and forth. The sounds were chaotic. The smells were astounding and the only way to function was to somehow block those things from sensory perception or you couldn't go on. So that is what we did and I don't know how we did it. I guess there is some innate gift in all of us and I really think it was the hand of God there.

Full interview transcript and digital resources:

http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.01146/
Thomas H. Hodge

...After I finished boot camp and advanced infantry training, they sent me to Motor Transport school. I got to Vietnam, I was a truck driver. When I got my orders in boot camp, they told me that the life expectancy for a truck driver was three days...

...It's like you go to a amusement park, and you have the ducks running along in a line and you're shooting at them, and that's about the size of a truck driver in Vietnam. If you're not doing that then you're doing duty that is comparable, and you're carrying explosives. So, I have a picture here that I can kind of show you of -- this is the -- we're running convoys, and the convoys always had machine gunners every fifth truck. We run about a 30, 40 truck convoy. We have maybe three tanks. Three tanks at the beginning of the convoy, maybe two tanks in the middle of the convoy, and two or three tanks at the end of the convoy.

...And if one of the -- if a round hits one of the artillery rounds, something like that, the whole convoy goes up in a row. We also haul aviation fuel, JP-4, for the helicopters. And this was a everyday thing, 365 days of the year we run convoys, there wasn't no Sunday, Monday, or Tuesday...

...We never kept track of the days. It was just a survival every day... It’s something you don't learn from school. It’s something that you get into and once it's -- your mind has to get -- you have to go into a cold mind. You know, when I say that, you know, if a buddy of yours gets shot and killed, you have some guys flip out, and once you see this happen day in, day out -- other -- the enemy getting killed, you got bodies laying here and there. Your mind starts to get cold...

...Doing truck driving, we run 18-hour days. In the Marine Corps you're guaranteed one hour of sleep a day and one meal. Every day. That's what you're guaranteed, so this was all part of the training that we got. It wasn't really the training, when you come up to boot camp, you got three meals a day. Once they say you hit Vietnam, you're guaranteed one meal a day, and that was it. And one hour of sleep a day. Some days I would go for two, sometimes three days without getting sleep.

...And we -- we don't even-- sometimes we don't even take our clothes off for four or five days, you know. If it's monsoon season we're getting soaking wet. We weren't wet from sweat, we're wet from the rain, so sometimes I've been-- I've been where I haven't taken by boots off for like two weeks. Your boots, once you get them off, you can't get them back on because they're wet, and you can't get them back on, so you just leave them on...

Full interview transcript and digital resources:

http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.03736/
Floyd Harold Kushner

The first day they took me to a cave, stripped my fatigue jacket off my back, tied me to a door and a teenage boy beat me with a bamboo rod. I was told his parents were killed by American bombs. We rested by day, and marched by night. I walked on rice paddy dikes, and couldn't see a thing. They would strike these little homemade lighters and by the sparks they made, see four or five steps. I was always falling off the dikes into the rice paddy water and had to be pulled back up. It was rough. On the way, I saw men, women and kids in tiger cages, and bamboo jails. I was taken to a camp, which must have been a medical facility as my wound was festering and full of maggots and I was sick. A woman heated up a rifle-cleaning rod and gave me a bamboo stick to bite on. She cauterized my through and through wound with the cleaning rod and I almost passed out with pain...

After walking for about a month through plains, then jungles and mountains, always west, they took me to a camp. I had been expecting a PW camp like a stalag with Hogan's Heroes; barbed wire, search lights, nice guards and Red Cross packages - and a hospital where I could work as a doctor. They took me to a darkened hut with an oriental prisoner who was not American. I didn't know whether he was Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian or Chinese. He spoke no English and was dying of TB. He was emaciated, weak, sick and coughed all day and night. I spent two days there and an English-speaking Vietnamese officer came with a portable tape recorder and asked me to make a statement against the war. I told him that I would rather die than speak against my country. His words which were unforgettable and if ever write a book, will be the title. He said, "You will find that dying is very easy; living, living is the difficult thing."...

We were held in a series of jungle camps from Jan. ‘68 to Feb. ‘71. At this time, conditions were so bad and we were doing so poorly, that they decided to move us to North Vietnam. They moved 12 of us. In all, 27 Americans had come through the camp. Five had been released and ten had died. They died of their wounds, disease, malnutrition and starvation...

In the North we were in a rough jail. There was bucket in the windowless, cement room used as a latrine. An electric bulb was on 24 hours. We got a piece of bread and a cup of pumpkin soup each day and three cups of hot water. We slept on pallets of wood and wore PJs and sandals and got three tailor made cigarettes per day. We dry shaved and bathed with a bucket from a well twice per week, got out of the cell to carry our latrine bucket daily. Towards the end, they let us exercise...

It was hard duty, but not the grim struggle for survival which characterized daily life in the camps in the south. In the north, I knew I would survive. In the south, we often wanted to die. I knew that when they ordered us north, I would make it. In the south, each day was a struggle for survival...

Full memoir and digital resources:

http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.65249/
Words of Vietnam-Era Presidents

Library of Congress documents for this activity:


Activity Procedure:

The United States was present in Vietnam from the early 1960s through 1975, spanning four presidential administrations. But Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon were the presidents whose terms covered much of the war and whose decisions affected the majority of the outcomes of the war. Both presidents faced difficult decisions, opposition from their citizens and soldiers, the effects of their and their predecessors’ political choices, and a war that became unwinnable.

1. On the board, make a comparison chart between World War II and Vietnam. In each of the columns, have students brainstorm words or phrases that describe each of these wars (pay particular attention to length of war, public opinion, reasons for entering the war, and nations involved).

2. Discuss with the class the list of World War II words. How do the students think the public image of the war, the motivation behind the war, and the outcomes affected Roosevelt’s presidency?

3. Now have the same discussion about Vietnam. How do the students think all of these factors affected Johnson and Nixon’s presidencies?

4. Open up Roosevelt’s final inaugural address on the computer and copy the text. Paste the text into a word cloud (wordle.net or tagxedo.com) and project the results. Which words are biggest (which means they appear the most in the text)? How does that reflect your assessments about Roosevelt’s presidency?

5. Now do the same for Johnson’s second address and both of Nixon’s addresses. Compare the three Vietnam-era addresses, paying particular attention to the biggest words and what that reflects about the two presidents’ priorities and the times in which they were speaking. Additionally, what differences, if any, do you see between Nixon’s two addresses?

6. Extension activity: Have each student create their own word cloud of either Johnson’s or Nixon’s rhetoric, using a State of the Union address, message to Congress or a news conference, and then write a brief summary of what the word cloud reflects about the president and the war. Rhetoric can be found at the American Presidency Project: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/.
Fourth Inaugural Address of Franklin D. Roosevelt

SATURDAY, JANUARY 20, 1945

Mr. Chief Justice, Mr. Vice President, my friends, you will understand and, I believe, agree with my wish that the form of this inauguration be simple and its words brief. We Americans of today, together with our allies, are passing through a period of supreme test. It is a test of our courage--of our resolve--of our wisdom--our essential democracy. If we meet that test--successfully and honorably--we shall perform a service of historic importance which men and women and children will honor throughout all time.

As I stand here today, having taken the solemn oath of office in the presence of my fellow countrymen--in the presence of our God-- I know that it is America's purpose that we shall not fail. In the days and in the years that are to come we shall work for a just and honorable peace, a durable peace, as today we work and fight for total victory in war. We can and we will achieve such a peace. We shall strive for perfection. We shall not achieve it immediately--but we still shall strive. We may make mistakes--but they must never be mistakes which result from faintness of heart or abandonment of moral principle. I remember that my old schoolmaster, Dr. Peabody, said, in days that seemed to us then to be secure and untroubled: "Things in life will not always run smoothly. Sometimes we will be rising toward the heights--then all will seem to reverse itself and start downward. The great fact to remember is that the trend of civilization itself is forever upward; that a line drawn through the middle of the peaks and the valleys of the centuries always has an upward trend." Our Constitution of 1787 was not a perfect instrument; it is not perfect yet. But it provided a firm base upon which all manner of men, of all races and colors and creeds, could build our solid structure of democracy. And so today, in this year of war, 1945, we have learned lessons-- at a fearful cost--and we shall profit by them. We have learned that we cannot live alone, at peace; that our own well-being is dependent on the well-being of other nations far away. We have learned that we must live as men, not as ostriches, nor as dogs in the manger. We have learned to be citizens of the world, members of the human community. We have learned the simple truth, as Emerson said, that "The only way to have a friend is to be one." We can gain no lasting peace if we approach it with suspicion and mistrust or with fear. We can gain it only if we proceed with the understanding, the confidence, and the courage which flow from conviction. The Almighty God has blessed our land in many ways. He has given our people stout hearts and strong arms with which to strike mighty blows for freedom and truth. He has given to our country a faith which has become the hope of all peoples in an anguished world. So we pray to Him now for the vision to see our way clearly--to see the way that leads to a better life for ourselves and for all our fellow men--to the achievement of His will to peace on earth.
Inaugural Address of Lyndon Baines Johnson

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 20, 1965

My fellow countrymen, on this occasion, the oath I have taken before you and before God is not mine alone, but ours together. We are one nation and one people. Our fate as a nation and our future as a people rest not upon one citizen, but upon all citizens. This is the majesty and the meaning of this moment. For every generation, there is a destiny. For some, history decides. For this generation, the choice must be our own. Even now, a rocket moves toward Mars. It reminds us that the world will not be the same for our children, or even for ourselves in a short span of years. The next man to stand here will look out on a scene different from our own, because ours is a time of change--rapid and fantastic change bearing the secrets of nature, multiplying the nations, placing in uncertain hands new weapons for mastery and destruction, shaking old values, and uprooting old ways. Our destiny in the midst of change will rest on the unchanged character of our people, and on their faith.

THE AMERICAN COVENANT
They came here--the exile and the stranger, brave but frightened--to find a place where a man could be his own man. They made a covenant with this land. Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind; and it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish.

JUSTICE AND CHANGE
First, justice was the promise that all who made the journey would share in the fruits of the land. In a land of great wealth, families must not live in hopeless poverty. In a land rich in harvest, children must not go hungry. In a land of healing miracles, neighbors must not suffer and die unattended. In a great land of learning and scholars, young people must be taught to read and write. For the more than 30 years that I have served this Nation, I have believed that this injustice to our people, this waste of our resources, was our real enemy. For 30 years or more, with the resources I have had, I have vigilantly fought against it. I have learned, and I know, that it will not surrender easily. But change has given us new weapons. Before this generation of Americans is finished, this enemy will not only retreat--it will be conquered. Justice requires us to remember that when any citizen denies his fellow, saying, "His color is not mine," or "His beliefs are strange and different," in that moment he betrays America, though his forebears created this Nation.

LIBERTY AND CHANGE
Liberty was the second article of our covenant. It was self-government. It was our Bill of Rights. But it was more. America would be a place where each man could be proud to be himself: stretching his talents, rejoicing in his work, important in the life of his neighbors and his nation. This has become more difficult in a world where change and growth seem to tower beyond the control and even the judgment of men. We must work to provide the knowledge and the surroundings which can enlarge the possibilities of every citizen. The American covenant called on us to help show the way for the liberation of man. And that is today our goal. Thus, if as a nation there is much outside our control, as a people no stranger is outside our hope. Change has brought new meaning to that old mission. We can never again stand aside, prideful in isolation. Terrific dangers and troubles that we once called "foreign" now constantly live among us. If American lives must end, and American treasure be spilled, in countries we barely know, that is the price that change has demanded of conviction and of our enduring covenant.

Think of our world as it looks from the rocket that is heading toward Mars. It is like a child's globe, hanging in space, the continents stuck to its side like colored maps. We are all fellow passengers on a dot of earth. And each of us, in the span of time, has really only a moment among our companions. How incredible it is that in this fragile existence, we should hate and destroy one another. There are possibilities enough for all who will abandon mastery over others to pursue mastery over nature. There is world enough for all to seek their happiness in their own way. Our Nation's course is abundantly clear. We aspire to nothing that belongs to others. We seek no dominion over our fellow man. but man's dominion over tyranny and misery. But more is required. Men want to be a part of a common enterprise--a cause greater than themselves. Each of us must find a way to advance the purpose of the Nation, thus finding new purpose for ourselves. Without this, we shall become a nation of strangers.
UNION AND CHANGE
The third article was union. To those who were small and few against the wilderness, the success of liberty demanded the strength of union. Two centuries of change have made this true again. No longer need capitalist and worker, farmer and clerk, city and countryside, struggle to divide our bounty. By working shoulder to shoulder, together we can increase the bounty of all. We have discovered that every child who learns, every man who finds work, every sick body that is made whole—like a candle added to an altar—brightens the hope of all the faithful. So let us reject any among us who seek to reopen old wounds and to rekindle old hatreds. They stand in the way of a seeking nation. Let us now join reason to faith and action to experience, to transform our unity of interest into a unity of purpose. For the hour and the day and the time are here to achieve progress without strife, to achieve change without hatred—not without difference of opinion, but without the deep and abiding divisions which scar the union for generations.

THE AMERICAN BELIEF
Under this covenant of justice, liberty, and union we have become a nation—prosperous, great, and mighty. And we have kept our freedom. But we have no promise from God that our greatness will endure. We have been allowed by Him to seek greatness with the sweat of our hands and the strength of our spirit. I do not believe that the Great Society is the ordered, changeless, and sterile battalion of the ants. It is the excitement of becoming—always becoming, trying, probing, falling, resting, and trying again—but always trying and always gaining. In each generation, with toil and tears, we have had to earn our heritage again. If we fail now, we shall have forgotten in abundance what we learned in hardship: that democracy rests on faith, that freedom asks more than it gives, and that the judgment of God is harshest on those who are most favored. If we succeed, it will not be because of what we have, but it will be because of what we are; not because of what we own, but, rather because of what we believe. For we are a nation of believers. Underneath the clamor of building and the rush of our day's pursuits, we are believers in justice and liberty and union, and in our own Union. We believe that every man must someday be free. And we believe in ourselves. Our enemies have always made the same mistake. In my lifetime—in depression and in war—they have awaited our defeat. Each time, from the secret places of the American heart, came forth the faith they could not see or that they could not even imagine. It brought us victory. And it will again. For this is what America is all about. It is the uncrossed desert and the unclimbed ridge. It is the star that is not reached and the harvest sleeping in the unplowed ground. Is our world gone? We say "Farewell." Is a new world coming? We welcome it—and we will bend it to the hopes of man. To these trusted public servants and to my family and those close friends of mine who have followed me down a long, winding road, and to all the people of this Union and the world, I will repeat today what I said on that sorrowful day in November 1963: "I will lead and I will do the best I can." But you must look within your own hearts to the old promises and to the old dream. They will lead you best of all. For myself, I ask only, in the words of an ancient leader: "Give me now wisdom and knowledge, that I may go out and come in before this people: for who can judge this thy people, that is so great?"
First Inaugural Address of Richard Milhous Nixon

MONDAY, JANUARY 20, 1969

Senator Dirksen, Mr. Chief Justice, Mr. Vice President, President Johnson, Vice President Humphrey, my fellow Americans—and my fellow citizens of the world community:

I ask you to share with me today the majesty of this moment. In the orderly transfer of power, we celebrate the unity that keeps us free. Each moment in history is a fleeting time, precious and unique. But some stand out as moments of beginning, in which courses are set that shape decades or centuries. This can be such a moment. Forces now are converging that make possible, for the first time, the hope that many of man's deepest aspirations can at last be realized. The spiraling pace of change allows us to contemplate, within our own lifetime, advances that once would have taken centuries. In throwing wide the horizons of space, we have discovered new horizons on earth. For the first time, because the people of the world want peace, and the leaders of the world are afraid of war, the times are on the side of peace. Eight years from now America will celebrate its 200th anniversary as a nation. Within the lifetime of most people now living, mankind will celebrate that great new year which comes only once in a thousand years—the beginning of the third millennium. What kind of nation we will be, what kind of world we will live in, whether we shape the future in the image of our hopes, is ours to determine by our actions and our choices. The greatest honor history can bestow is the title of peacemaker. This honor now beckons America—the chance to help lead the world at last out of the valley of turmoil, and onto that high ground of peace that man has dreamed of since the dawn of civilization. If we succeed, generations to come will say of us now living that we mastered our moment, that we helped make the world safe for mankind. This is our summons to greatness. I believe the American people are ready to answer this call. The second third of this century has been a time of proud achievement. We have made enormous strides in science and industry and agriculture. We have shared our wealth more broadly than ever. We have learned at last to manage a modern economy to assure its continued growth. We have given freedom new reach, and we have begun to make its promise real for black as well as for white. We see the hope of tomorrow in the youth of today. I know America's youth. I believe in them. We can be proud that they are better educated, more committed, more passionately driven by conscience than any generation in our history. No people has ever been so close to the achievement of a just and abundant society, or so possessed of the will to achieve it. Because our strengths are so great, we can afford to appraise our weaknesses with candor and to approach them with hope. Standing in this same place a third of a century ago, Franklin Delano Roosevelt addressed a Nation ravaged by depression and gripped in fear. He could say in surveying the Nation's troubles: "They concern, thank God, only material things." Our crisis today is the reverse. We have found ourselves rich in goods, but ragged in spirit; reaching with magnificent precision for the moon, but falling into raucous discord on earth. We are caught in war, wanting peace. We are torn by division, wanting unity. We see around us empty lives, wanting fulfillment. We see tasks that need doing, waiting for hands to do them.

To a crisis of the spirit, we need an answer of the spirit. To find that answer, we need only look within ourselves. When we listen to "the better angels of our nature," we find that they celebrate the simple things, the basic things—such as goodness, decency, love, kindness. Greatness comes in simple trappings. The simple things are the ones most needed today if we are to surmount what divides us, and cement what unites us. To lower our voices would be a simple thing. In these difficult years, America has suffered from a fever of words; from inflated rhetoric that promises more than it can deliver; from angry rhetoric that fans discontents into hatreds; from bombastic rhetoric that postures instead of persuading. We cannot learn from one another until we stop shouting at one another—until we speak quietly enough so that our words can be heard as well as our voices. For its part, government will listen. We will strive to listen in new ways— to the voices of quiet anguish, the voices that speak without words, the voices of the heart—to the injured voices, the anxious voices, the voices that have despaired of being heard. Those who have been left out, we will try to bring in. Those left behind, we will help to catch up. For all of our people, we will set as our goal the decent order that makes progress possible and our lives secure. As we reach toward our hopes, our task is to build on what has gone before—not turning away from the old, but turning toward the new. In this past third of a century, government has passed more laws, spent more money, initiated more programs, than in all our previous history. In pursuing our goals of full employment, better housing, excellence in education; in rebuilding our cities and improving our rural areas; in protecting our environment and enhancing the quality of life—in all these and more, we will and must press urgently forward. We shall plan now for the day when our wealth can be transferred from the destruction of war abroad to the urgent needs of our people at home. The American dream does not come to those who fall asleep. But we are approaching the limits of what government alone can do. Our greatest need now is to reach beyond government, and to enlist the legions of the concerned and the committed. What has to be done, has to be done by government and people together or it will
not be done at all. The lesson of past agony is that without the people we can do nothing; with the people we can do everything. To match the magnitude of our tasks, we need the energies of our people—enlisted not only in grand enterprises, but more importantly in those small, splendid efforts that make headlines in the neighborhood newspaper instead of the national journal. With these, we can build a great cathedral of the spirit—each of us raising it one stone at a time, as he reaches out to his neighbor, helping, caring, doing. I do not offer a life of uninspiring ease. I do not call for a life of grim sacrifice. I ask you to join in a high adventure—one as rich as humanity itself, and as exciting as the times we live in. The essence of freedom is that each of us shares in the shaping of his own destiny. Until he has been part of a cause larger than himself, no man is truly whole. The way to humanity itself, and as exciting as the times we live in. The essence of freedom is that each of us shares in the

uninspiring ease. I do not call for a life of grim sacrifice. I ask you to join in a high adventure—one as rich as humanity itself, and as exciting as the times we live in. The essence of freedom is that each of us shares in the shaping of his own destiny. Until he has been part of a cause larger than himself, no man is truly whole. The way to

fulfillment is in the use of our talents; we achieve nobility in the spirit that inspires that use. As we measure what can be done, we shall promise only what we know we can produce, but as we chart our goals we shall be lifted by our dreams. No man can be fully free while his neighbor is not. To go forward at all is to go forward together. This means black and white together, as one nation, not two. The laws have caught up with our conscience. What remains is to give life to what is in the law: to ensure at last that as all are born equal in dignity before God, all are born equal in dignity before man. As we learn to go forward together at home, let us also seek to go forward together with all mankind. Let us take as our goal: where peace is unknown, make it welcome; where peace is fragile, make it strong; where peace is temporary, make it permanent. After a period of confrontation, we are entering an era of negotiation. Let all nations know that during this administration our lines of communication will be open. We seek an open world—open to ideas, open to the exchange of goods and people—a world in which no people, great or small, will live in angry isolation. We cannot expect to make everyone our friend, but we can try to make no one our enemy. Those who would be our adversaries, we invite to a peaceful competition—not in conquering territory or extending dominion, but in enriching the life of man. As we explore the reaches of space, let us go to the new worlds together—not as new worlds to be conquered, but as a new adventure to be shared. With those who are willing to join, let us cooperate to reduce the burden of arms, to strengthen the structure of peace, to lift up the poor and the hungry. But to all those who would be tempted by weakness, let us leave no doubt that we will be as strong as we need to be for as long as we need to be. Over the past twenty years, since I first came to this Capital as a freshman Congressman, I have visited most of the nations of the world. I have come to know the leaders of the world, and the great forces, the hatreds, the fears that divide the world. I know that peace does not come through wishing for it—that there is no substitute for days and even years of patient and prolonged diplomacy. I also know the people of the world. I have seen the hunger of a homeless child, the pain of a man wounded in battle, the grief of a mother who has lost her son. I know these have no ideology, no race. I know America. I know the heart of America is good. I speak from my own heart, and the heart of my country, the deep concern we have for those who suffer, and those who sorrow. I have taken an oath today in the presence of God and my countrymen to uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States. To that oath I now add this sacred commitment: I shall consecrate my office, my energies, and all the wisdom I can summon, to the cause of peace among nations. Let this message be heard by strong and weak alike: The peace we seek to win is not victory over any other people, but the peace that comes "with healing in its wings"; with compassion for those who have suffered; with understanding for those who have opposed us; with the opportunity for all the peoples of this earth to choose their own destiny. Only a few short weeks ago, we shared the glory of man's first sight of the world as God sees it, as a single sphere reflecting light in the darkness. As the Apollo astronauts flew over the moon's gray surface on Christmas Eve, they spoke to us of the beauty of earth—and in that voice so clear across the lunar distance, we heard them invoke God's blessing on its goodness. In that moment, their view from the moon moved poet Archibald MacLeish to write: "To see the earth as it truly is, small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the earth together, brothers on that bright loveliness in the eternal cold—brothers who know now they are truly brothers." In that moment of surpassing technological triumph, men turned their thoughts toward home and humanity—seeing in that far perspective that man's destiny on earth is not divisible; telling us that however far we reach into the cosmos, our destiny lies not in the stars but on Earth itself, in our own hands, in our own hearts. We have endured a long night of the American spirit. But as our eyes catch the dimness of the first rays of dawn, let us not curse the remaining dark. Let us gather the light. Our destiny offers, not the cup of despair, but the chalice of opportunity. So let us seize it, not in fear, but in gladness— and, "riders on the earth together," let us go forward, firm in our faith, steadfast in our purpose, cautious of the dangers; but sustained by our confidence in the will of God and the promise of man.
Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Chief Justice, Senator Cook, Mrs. Eisenhower, and my fellow citizens of this great and good country we share together: When we met here four years ago, America was bleak in spirit, depressed by the prospect of seemingly endless war abroad and of destructive conflict at home. As we meet here today, we stand on the threshold of a new era of peace in the world. The central question before us is: How shall we use that peace? Let us resolve that this era we are about to enter will not be what other postwar periods have so often been: a time of retreat and isolation that leads to stagnation at home and invites new danger abroad. Let us resolve that this will be what it can become: a time of great responsibilities greatly borne, in which we renew the spirit and the promise of America as we enter our third century as a nation. This past year saw far-reaching results from our new policies for peace. By continuing to revitalize our traditional friendships, and by our missions to Peking and to Moscow, we were able to establish the base for a new and more durable pattern of relationships among the nations of the world. Because of America’s bold initiatives, 1972 will be long remembered as the year of the greatest progress since the end of World War II toward a lasting peace in the world.

The peace we seek in the world is not the flimsy peace which is merely an interlude between wars, but a peace which can endure for generations to come. It is important that we understand both the necessity and the limitations of America’s role in maintaining that peace. Unless we in America work to preserve the peace, there will be no peace. Unless we in America work to preserve freedom, there will be no freedom. But let us clearly understand the new nature of America’s role, as a result of the new policies we have adopted over these past four years. We shall respect our treaty commitments. We shall support vigorously the principle that no country has the right to impose its will or rule on another by force. We shall continue, in this era of negotiation, to work for the limitation of nuclear arms, and to reduce the danger of confrontation between the great powers. We shall do our share in defending peace and freedom in the world. But we shall expect others to do their share. The time has passed when America will make every other nation’s conflict our own, or make every other nation’s future our responsibility, or presume to tell the people of other nations how to manage their own affairs. Just as we respect the right of each nation to determine its own future, we also recognize the responsibility of each nation to secure its own future. Just as America’s role is indispensable in preserving the world’s peace, so is each nation’s role indispensable in preserving its own peace. Together with the rest of the world, let us resolve to move forward from the beginnings we have made. Let us continue to bring down the walls of hostility which have divided the world for too long, and to build in their place bridges of understanding—so that despite profound differences between systems of government, the people of the world can be friends. Let us build a structure of peace in the world in which the weak are as safe as the strong—in which each respects the right of the other to live by a different system—in which those who would influence others will do so by the strength of their ideas, and not by the force of their arms. Let us accept that high responsibility not as a burden, but gladly—gladly because the chance to build such a peace is the noblest endeavor in which a nation can engage; gladly, also, because only if we act greatly in meeting our responsibilities abroad will we remain a great Nation, and only if we remain a great Nation will we act greatly in meeting our challenges at home. We have the chance today to do more than ever before in our history to make life better in America—to ensure better education, better health, better housing, better transportation, a cleaner environment—to restore respect for law, to make our communities more livable—and to insure the God-given right of every American to full and equal opportunity. Because the range of our needs is so great—because the reach of our opportunities is so great—let us be bold in our determination to meet those needs in new ways. Just as building a structure of peace abroad has required turning away from old policies that failed, so building a new era of progress at home requires turning away from old policies that have failed. Abroad, the shift from old policies to new has not been a retreat from our responsibilities, but a better way to peace. And at home, the shift from old policies to new will not be a retreat from our responsibilities, but a better way to progress. Abroad and at home, the key to those new responsibilities lies in the placing and the division of responsibility. We have lived too long with the consequences of attempting to gather all power and responsibility in Washington. Abroad and at home, the time has come to turn away from the condescending policies of paternalism—of "Washington knows best." A person can be expected to act responsibly only if he has responsibility. This is human nature. So let us encourage individuals at home and nations abroad to do more for themselves, to decide more for themselves. Let us locate responsibility in more places. Let us measure what we will do for others by what they will do for themselves. That is why today I offer no promise of a purely governmental solution for every problem. We have lived too long with that false promise. In trusting too much in government, we have asked of it more than it can deliver. This leads only to inflated expectations, to reduced individual effort, and to a disappointment and
frustration that erode confidence both in what government can do and in what people can do. Government must learn to take less from people so that people can do more for themselves. Let us remember that America was built not by government, but by people—not by welfare, but by work—not by shirking responsibility, but by seeking responsibility. In our own lives, let each of us ask—not just what will government do for me, but what can I do for myself? In the challenges we face together, let each of us ask—not just how can government help, but how can I help? Your National Government has a great and vital role to play. And I pledge to you that where this Government should act, we will act boldly and we will lead boldly. But just as important is the role that each and every one of us must play, as an individual and as a member of his own community. From this day forward, let each of us make a solemn commitment in his own heart: to bear his responsibility, to do his part, to live his ideals—so that together, we can see the dawn of a new age of progress for America, and together, as we celebrate our 200th anniversary as a nation, we can do so proud in the fulfillment of our promise to ourselves and to the world. As America’s longest and most difficult war comes to an end, let us again learn to debate our differences with civility and decency. And let each of us reach out for that one precious quality government cannot provide—a new level of respect for the rights and feelings of one another, a new level of respect for the individual human dignity which is the cherished birthright of every American. Above all else, the time has come for us to renew our faith in ourselves and in America. In recent years, that faith has been challenged. Our children have been taught to be ashamed of their country, ashamed of their parents, ashamed of America’s record at home and of its role in the world. At every turn, we have been beset by those who find everything wrong with America and little that is right. But I am confident that this will not be the judgment of history on these remarkable times in which we are privileged to live. America’s record in this century has been unparalleled in the world’s history for its responsibility, for its generosity, for its creativity and for its progress. Let us be proud that our system has produced and provided more freedom and more abundance, more widely shared, than any other system in the history of the world. Let us be proud that in each of the four wars in which we have been engaged in this century, including the one we are now bringing to an end, we have fought not for our selfish advantage, but to help others resist aggression. Let us be proud that by our bold, new initiatives, and by our steadfastness for peace with honor, we have made a breakthrough toward creating in the world what the world has not known before—a structure of peace that can last, not merely for our time, but for generations to come. We are embarking here today on an era that presents challenges great as those any nation, or any generation, has ever faced. We shall answer to God, to history, and to our conscience for the way in which we use these years. As I stand in this place, so hallowed by history, I think of others who have stood here before me. I think of the dreams they had for America, and I think of how each recognized that he needed help far beyond himself in order to make those dreams come true. Today, I ask your prayers that in the years ahead I may have God’s help in making decisions that are right for America, and I pray for your help so that together we may be worthy of our challenge. Let us pledge together to make these next four years the best four years in America’s history, so that on its 200th birthday America will be as young and as vital as when it began, and as bright a beacon of hope for all the world. Let us go forward from here confident in hope, strong in our faith in one another, sustained by our faith in God who created us, and striving always to serve His purpose.