

Analyzing Primary Sources Activity

The Vietnam War, 1954–1975

The Silent Majority

Background

When Richard Nixon was sworn in as president on January 20, 1969, the United States was bitterly divided over the war in Vietnam. The war, which had its roots in covert U.S. operations in Vietnam beginning in the mid-1950s, had already claimed more than 31,000 American lives. More than a half million American troops were “in-country.” No coherent plan existed for winning the war or stopping the carnage long enough for peace talks to take place.

On November 3, 1969, President Nixon addressed the nation to outline his plan for bringing the war to an honorable end. The speech became famous not for its content but for a three-word phrase near the end of the speech, a phrase that introduced a group of Americans who Nixon said supported his efforts—“the Silent Majority.”

Directions: Read the following excerpt from Nixon’s “Silent Majority” speech. Then answer the questions that follow.

"I have chosen a plan for peace. I believe it will succeed. If it does succeed, what the critics say now won't matter. If it does not succeed, anything I say then won't matter. I know it may not be fashionable to speak of patriotism or national destiny these days. But I feel it is appropriate to do so on this occasion. Two hundred years ago this Nation was weak and poor. But even then, America was the hope of millions in the world. Today we have become the strongest and richest nation in the world. And the wheel of destiny has turned so that any hope the world has for the survival of peace and freedom will be determined by whether the American people have the moral stamina and the courage to meet the challenge of free world leadership. Let historians not record that when America was the most powerful nation in the world we passed on the other side of the road and allowed the last hopes for peace and freedom of millions of people to be suffocated by the forces of totalitarianism. And so tonight—to you, the great silent majority of my fellow Americans—I ask for your support. I pledged in my campaign for the Presidency to end the war in a way that we could win the peace. I have initiated a plan of action which will enable me to keep that pledge.

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Activity *Cont.*

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The more support I can have from the American people, the sooner that pledge can be redeemed; for the more divided we are at home, the less likely the enemy is to negotiate at Paris.

Let us be united for peace. Let us also be united against defeat. Because let us understand: North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that."

—from the "Silent Majority" Speech,
President Richard Nixon, 1969

Critical Thinking

1. What does Nixon say has changed now that America is the strongest and richest nation in the world?
2. Why does Nixon say "it may not be fashionable to speak of patriotism or national destiny these days"?
3. To whom do you think Nixon is addressing his final comments in the excerpt?
4. What is ironic about the term "Silent Majority"?
5. How did the term "Silent Majority" benefit Nixon and his policies?