

Teaching the 1960s with Primary Sources

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ONE OF THE MOST POPULAR COURSES on college campuses and one of the time periods that still provokes considerable interest among high school students is the 1960s. Drawing on my experience as an author of several documentary collections and as a teacher, this paper will consider ways that teachers and students can use primary sources to enhance their understanding of this seminal era.¹ In addition, both the text and notes of this paper identify where teachers and students can find the particular documents mentioned below and others like them.² Numerous studies have shown that using primary sources, such as documents in a history class or laboratory experiments in science courses, encourages active learning. Primary sources compel students to interrogate the past and to begin to form their own interpretations and narratives rather than memorize facts and dates and/or digest interpretations written by others.³ Simultaneously, teachers can enhance their students' understanding of the historical method or craft by using original documents.

The advantages of using primary sources in classes about the 1960s are of even greater magnitude than in courses about other periods. Many of the authors of the most widely used texts on the 1960s, and many teachers of classes on the 1960s lived through this time period and seek to shed light on it by drawing on their personal experiences. Todd Gitlin's popular book, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, exemplifies this

approach. While students can learn a great deal from this mix of memoir and history, we need to recognize the degree to which such an approach encourages passive learning. Challenging or questioning any authority is difficult enough for most students. Expecting them to challenge scholars who lived through the period may be too much. The fact that college courses on the sixties often attract nontraditional students or adult learners adds to the reluctance of traditional students to think and act critically.⁴

It is additionally inappropriate for classes on the sixties to operate in a passive and/or uncritical manner since new teaching approaches aimed at promoting active learning and critical thinking were to a large degree initially developed by sixties activists, such as those who participated in the Mississippi Freedom Schools and/or founded *Radical Teacher*. Several years ago, for instance, I attended a continuing education conference hosted by the University of Virginia entitled "Rethinking Recent American History." Among the topics we "rethought" was the civil rights movement. The facilitator of this session was Julian Bond, one of the leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the author of a collection of primary documents on the civil rights era. Ironically, rather than require us to draw on his compilation of documents, Bond presented a lecture on the recent historiography of the movement. As a result, his method undercut his argument that the movement needs to be viewed from the grassroots up rather than the top down.

As a colleague of many men and women who pioneered radical teaching techniques, Bond understood very well the value of active learning and critical thinking. I suspect he chose to use a more traditional approach at this conference for the same reason many teachers are reluctant to use more novel approaches in their classrooms. Simply stated, they want to cover so much material in so little time that they fear giving control over to students lest the students not learn the main "lessons." I also suspect that many teachers are fearful of losing control when they are covering subjects for which they seek to reveal a usable past.

One final reason for using primary sources in classes on the 1960s is that they have the potential to produce a broader, more balanced and complex sense of the decade than is obtained customarily from either textbooks or popular culture. Perhaps more than any other time period, the sixties has become defined by a number of clichés. The film *Forrest Gump* embodies almost every one of these clichés, including the foul-mouthed, long-haired, dope-smoking, antiwar protester who abuses his girlfriend. By engaging students with primary documents, teachers can encourage them to shed these simplistic images and arrive at a much more sophisticated understanding of the past.

Turning now to how I teach the course. I begin with an examination of the social, cultural, political and economic conditions of the late 1950s, with an emphasis on two particular themes, mass consumerism and the cold war.⁵ To this end, students are required to read a set of documents that range in content and type. First they analyze a General Electric advertisement entitled "People's Capitalism—What Makes It Work for You?" This particular advertisement was part of a broader Advertising Council campaign sponsored by the United States Information Agency. Its motto, "Progress is Our Most Important Product," mirrored General Electric's corporate slogan. The campaign culminated with a series of trade exhibitions, including one in the Soviet Union, the scene of the famous Nixon-Khrushchev "kitchen debates." Students are required to read excerpts from this heated exchange, where the Soviet premier and America's vice-president argued over who made better washing machines.⁶

Second, students review a special end-of-the-decade double issue of *Life* magazine, entitled: "The Good Life." They read the publishers' introduction, which proclaims: "for the first time a civilization has reached a point where most people are no longer preoccupied exclusively with providing food and shelter," and they examine an assortment of photographs of gleaming swimming pools, pleasure boats, plush vacation retreats and other resplendent scenes.⁷

Third, students look at the want ads, excerpted from the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* on January 2, 1960 and read two speeches, Adlai Stevenson's, "Commencement Address" which he delivered to the class of 1955 at Smith College and the Reverend Billy Graham's, "The National Purpose: Moral and Spiritual Cancer Found in Stress on Personal Comfort," which was placed in the *Congressional Record* with the unanimous consent of the House of Representatives.⁸ A number of other documents are recommended, including the introduction to David Potter's *People of Plenty*, President Eisenhower's press conference in which he discussed the budding crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas and the launching of sputnik, David Perlman's story on the "Howl" trial in San Francisco, and several leaflets distributed by the American Nationalists on race-mixing and the entertainment industry.⁹

Nearly every one of these documents provokes discussion. In particular, the "Want Ads," because they were explicitly divided into separate categories, one for men and one for women, and included specific references to jobs for "colored" workers, work as a great tool for discussing the depth of sexual and racial discrimination. Adlai Stevenson's speech, in which he asserted that most of Smith's graduates would become housewives, "whether you like the idea or not just now—and you'll like

it!" generates a good deal of disgust and then some consideration of why his assertion did not result in a similar outcry at the time. Usually, I try to work these documents into a larger writing assignment, such as asking if the 1950s were really "Happy Days." The selections also provide a baseline for evaluating the changes, or lack thereof, that took place during the 1960s. For instance, students can be required to compare and contrast *Life's* end of the decade issue in 1969 to its "good life" issue in 1959.

Since I want students to view the 1960s historically, I spend a good deal of time on the first half of the decade, before the antiwar movement, counterculture, sexual revolution and women's movement exploded on the scene. I expose students to documents that represent a wide variety of political persuasions and issues, with the hope that they will see that later developments were not inevitable. For instance, groups of students are required to represent a particular political position or organization. Put somewhat more imaginatively, I inform students that they will hold a student activities fair, where each group role plays a particular organization of the early 1960s. Students can develop brochures, buttons, bumper stickers, or anything else that helps them explain their positions and recruit new students to their organizations. Among the documents that students are required to read in preparation for this assignment are SDS's "Port Huron Statement," the Young Americans for Freedom's "Sharon Statement," excerpts from the testimony of Women Strike for Peace before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, Robert Moses' "Letter from a Mississippi Jail Cell," George Wallace's "Inaugural Address" and Rachel Carson's testimony before the Senate Subcommittee on Reorganization, better known as the Ribicoff Committee.¹⁰ From these documents, students glean a sense of the views of both young leftists and young conservatives, of the grass roots civil rights movement, of prominent white supremacists, and of the budding peace and environmental movements. They also come to understand the degree to which nearly every social movement or reform generated both enthusiastic support and vigorous opposition.

Then we examine the "Great Society." Students review President Johnson's "Commencement Address" on the Great Society, which he presented at the University of Michigan in the spring of 1964, and AFL-CIO President George Meany's "Testimony" in favor of Medicare. They read Ronald Reagan's "A Time for Choosing" and Strom Thurmond's criticism of the Supreme Court's decision to "ban" prayer in school.¹¹ To enliven our examination of this subject, students participate in a mock debate, in which they pretend to represent either students for Johnson or students for Goldwater. They are required to draw on the documents in

making their arguments for or against Johnson's Great Society proposals. To help them understand the appeal of the Great Society, I recommend that they read Robert Collins' "Growth Liberalism in the 1960s," one of the most sophisticated analyses of the 1960s.¹² Students are also required to find the results of the 1964 presidential election in their hometown or congressional district. Often, since Johnson won in a landslide in most of the nation, these results compel the students to consider further the appeal of Johnson's vision as opposed to Goldwater's, which tends to be much more favorably viewed today than it was at the time. In addition, the task of finding local election results, which are usually unavailable online, teaches a basic lesson on the tools or skills necessary to conduct historical research.

Only after we have examined these subjects do we turn to the themes most commonly associated with the 1960s: Vietnam, racial and student protest, and sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. My primary objective in discussing these themes is to encourage students to see the variety and complexity of opinions that existed on each one of these issues. Furthermore, I seek to prod my students to compare their own interpretations of these subjects, based on their reading of a sampling of primary documents, to interpretations developed by scholars and other pundits.

In my unit on the Vietnam War, students are required to read speeches and essays by the formulators of the Johnson Administration's policy in Vietnam, by prominent antiwar activists, by "dove" Senators, by antiwar conservatives, and by labor leaders whose views of the war changed over time.¹³ (See endnote for specific documents.) We discuss the documents by utilizing a technique employed by antiwar activists, namely, the teach-in. Each student is assigned a specific document and is responsible for summarizing it in class. The document that generally provokes the greatest amount of discussion is Donald Duncan's "The Whole Thing Was A Lie." Duncan was a Vietnam veteran who spoke out against the war as early as 1966. Paul Potter's, "We Must Name the System," also has proven especially compelling because Potter was a college student when he delivered this address at the first significant antiwar demonstration in the spring of 1965.

Probably the most fun unit is on the sexual revolution and the counterculture. The last time I taught a class on the 1960s we began this unit by reading the San Francisco *Oracle's* announcement of the first human "be-in." If possible, it is helpful to share the poster that publicized this "union of love and activism," since its artwork is even more outrageous than is its invitation to bring "costumes, blankets, bells, flags, symbols, cymbals, drums, beads, feathers, and flowers." To enhance our sense of the spirit of this self-described "joyful Pow-Wow," we hold our own be-

in (sans drugs) at the center of the campus. Students are required to bring their own documents from the time, ranging from Allen Ginsburg's poem, "America," to music by the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, and others.¹⁴ Afterwards we ponder the significance of such gatherings. Did those who participated really think they were creating a new world? Just to remind students that not everyone lost their senses during the 1960s, that there was some cultural continuity as well as discontinuity, and that youths and their elders maintained some things in common, I have them read an excerpt from George Vecsey's *Joy in Mudville*, in which the author describes the most important event of 1969, not man's landing on the moon, not Woodstock, but the New York Mets' victory in baseball's world series.¹⁵ To aid their quest to understand the counterculture, I assign George Lipsitz's insightful essay, "Who'll Stop the Rain," which examines both the revolutionary and not-so-revolutionary nature of rock music and the music industry.¹⁶

An alternative lesson plan to conducting a be-in is to require students to put together a radio documentary on the history of Rock and Roll, or the music of the 1960s, and/or of Woodstock. Students are quite good at burning CD's and surprisingly knowledgeable about the music of the times. But they have not given much thought to the historical context of the music. Requiring them to produce an audio documentary helps address this shortcoming. It also helps develop a skill that they might be able to put to good use outside of the classroom.

Probably the most difficult unit in the course is the one on the rise of black power and white backlash. Among the documents reviewed are Malcolm X's "Address to a Meeting in New York," the Black Panther Party's "Ten Point Program," H. Rap Brown's "Burn this Town Down" speech, Spiro Agnew's condemnation of moderate civil rights leaders for appeasing black radicals, and excerpts from the Kerner Commission report. In addition to these written documents, students examine posters and photographs and watch contemporary film footage. Many of the episodes in the second half of the "Eyes on the Prize" series are particularly useful.¹⁷ To prod students to read these documents carefully and critically, the class conducts a mock Senate subcommittee investigation into the nation's civil disorders. Students present the views of the aforementioned individuals on the causes of the disorders. Still in their roles, they also engage in a debate on how the nation should respond, whether with new and more Great Society measures, with more acts of law and order, or something in between. Thomas Sugrue's writing on the urban crisis in Detroit provides excellent secondary reading on this subject.¹⁸

Separate from our examination of the sexual revolution we examine the rise of the women's and other liberation movements. Returning to an

approach we took earlier in the semester, the class holds another student activities fair. This time, however, rather than representing SDS, YAF, and SNCC, students are required to attempt to recruit their fellows to several newer liberation movements. To prepare them for these roles, students read several documents collected by Robin Morgan in *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, a contemporary collection of documents from the women's liberation movement, an excerpt from *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, as well Carl Wittman's "Gay Manifesto" and Cesar Chavez's "Letter from Delano." Borrowing from a lesson handed down to me by Barbara Winslow, the next time I teach this unit, students representing the women's liberationist group(s) will be required to throw articles which symbolize their repression into a trash can, as did those who protested against the Miss America Pageant in 1968.¹⁹

Lastly, I have a unit entitled "Looking Backward," which consists of reflections on the sixties by those who lived through it. Two documents that work well in this unit may be called primary sources or not, depending on one's definition of the term: Tom Hayden's *Reunion*, and Peter Collier and David Horowitz's "Lefties for Reagan." They present diametrically opposed views of the sixties, one favorable and the other condemnatory. The fact that Hayden, Collier and Horowitz were once all prominent new leftists yet found themselves on opposite ends of the political spectrum by the 1980s prods students to consider the complex and contradictory legacy of the era. Students can supplement these well-known activists memories of the sixties by conducting oral history interviews with their parents and teachers.²⁰

One assignment that allows for some closure to the course is to require a historiographical essay that makes use of these memoirs, a select number of documents, and some secondary sources. Generally, I find that students should focus on one or two particular themes, such as civil rights and black power, rather than on the entire sixties in these papers. This assignment also allows students to explore more fully subjects that have received little attention because of time constraints. For instance, students can explore the rebirth of feminism or the emergence of the Mexican-American protest movement. Moreover, historiographical essays serve as an excellent starting point for senior seminar papers and independent study projects.

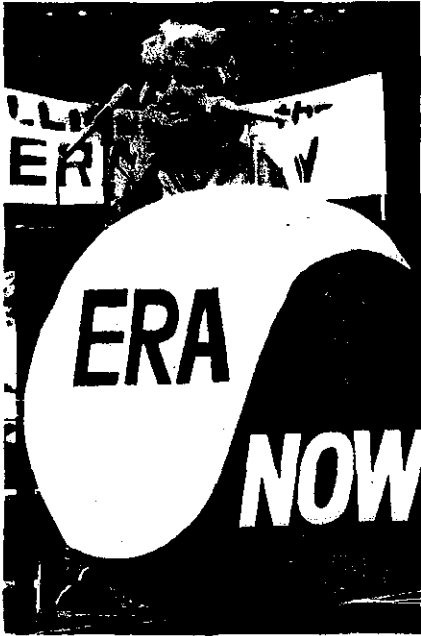
One final advantage in using primary sources is that by exposing students to a wide variety of sources, teachers can demonstrate the complexity of the past and the richness and joy of doing historical research. It is important for students to see and feel, firsthand, documents that represent both mainstream and marginal views, and to realize that the past can be reconstructed from famous documents, such as speeches by

presidents, and from mundane sources, like the classified advertisements. Throughout my course, students are required to pay close attention to where the documents came from originally. Without a doubt, few if any of them have ever heard of *Liberation* or *Ramparts* magazines. Nor have they given much consideration to using congressional hearings, presidential papers, and/or contemporary anthologies in their own term papers. By term's end, however, I hope that one lesson they have learned is that they can not expect to understand the past simply by doing a keyword search on the internet (although the internet does have a treasure trove of primary sources) and that historical research is much more enjoyable when one immerses oneself in the documents themselves.

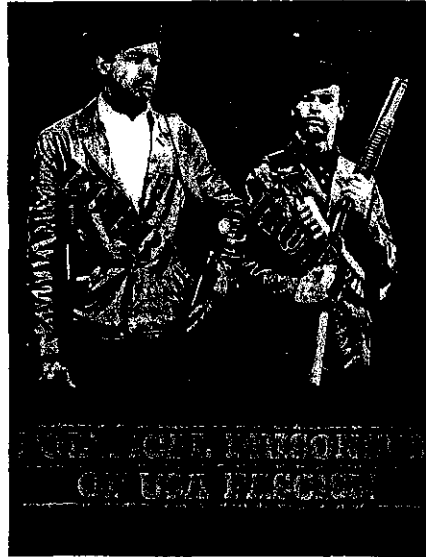
Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Memphis, Tennessee, April 5, 2003.
2. Peter B. Levy, ed., *America in the Sixties—Right, Left, and Center: A Documentary History* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998); Peter B. Levy, ed., *Let Freedom Ring: A Documentary History of the Modern Civil Rights Movement* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992). Readers are welcome to peruse my course outlines on America in the 1960s, which includes a list of web resources on the 1960s, at: <<http://goose.ycp.edu/~plevy/h472.htm>>.
3. The literature on critical thinking and active learning is enormous. Among the best works are Lauren Resnick, *Education and Learning to Think* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1987), Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason: Rationality, Critical Thinking, & Education* (New York: Routledge, 1998), and Richard Paul, *Critical Thinking: How to Prepare Students for a Rapidly Changing World* (Santa Rosa, CA: Foundation for Critical Thinking, 1993). Works more particularly focused on critical thinking and the use of primary sources in history classes, include Tom Holt, *Thinking Critically: Narrative, Imagination, and Understanding* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1990), David Kobrin, *Beyond the Textbook: Teaching History Using Documents and Primary Sources* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996), Robert Blackey, *History Anew: Innovations in the Teaching of History Today* (Long Beach, CA: University Press of California State Long Beach, 1993), and Deanne Shiroma, *Using Primary Sources on the Internet to Teach and Learn History* [electronic government publication] (Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 2000).
4. Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987).
5. All of the specific documents can be found in Peter Levy, ed., *America in the Sixties—Right, Left, and Center*. For those who wish to use the documents in their original form, I have included their original publication information below. General Electric, "People's Capitalism—What Makes It Work for You?" *Harper's Weekly*, 213, no 1275 (August 1956), pp. 18-19.
6. Richard M. Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev, "The Kitchen Debate," *New York Times*, July 25, 1959, p. 1.

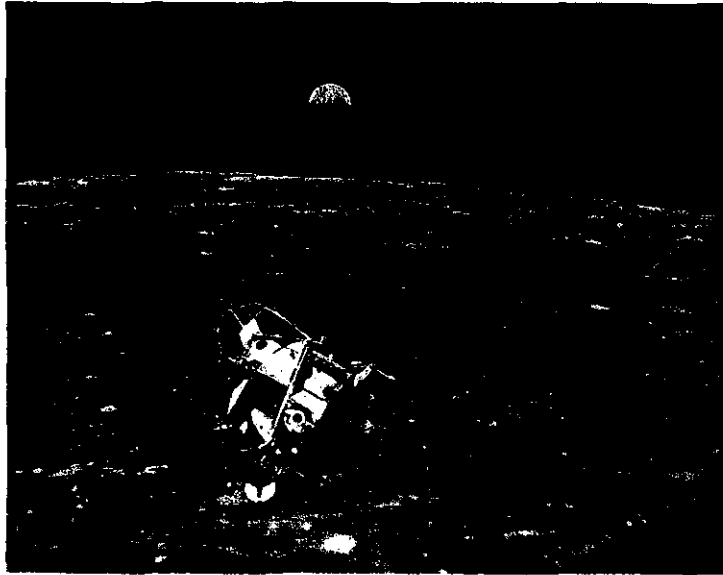
7. *Life* 47, no. 26 (December 28, 1959).
8. "Want Ads," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 2, 1960, pp. 17-18; Adlai Stevenson, "Commencement Address," reprinted in *Woman's Home Companion* 82 (September 1955), pp. 29-31; Billy Graham, "The National Purpose: Moral and Spiritual Cancer Found in Stress on Personal Comfort," *Congressional Record*, 86th Congress, 2nd Session, 106, part 9 (June 6, 1960), pp. 11859-11860.
9. David Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954); Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Press Conference on Sputnik and Little Rock," September 3, 1957, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1957* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1958), pp. 639-646; David Perlman, "How Captain Hanrahan Made 'Howl' a Best-Seller," *The Reporter* 17, no 10 (December 12, 1957), pp. 37-39; and American Nationalist, "Fixed Entertainment: Interracial Style," undated, Radical Right Collection, Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace, Stanford, California.
10. Students for a Democratic Society, "Port Huron Statement," (1962), Students for a Democratic Society Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin; Young Americans for Freedom, "The Sharon Statement," (1960); Women Strike for Peace, "Testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities," *Hearings: Communist Activities in the Peace Movement*, December 11-13, 1962 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1963), pp. 2073-2201; Robert Moses, *Letter From a Mississippi Jail Cell*, (1961), in Howard Zinn, SNCC: *The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 76; George C. Wallace, "Inaugural Address," January 14, 1963, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama; Rachel Carson, "Testimony before the Ribicoff Committee," *Senate Subcommittee on Reorganization and International Organization*, June 4, 1963 (Washington, DC: GPO), pp. 206-246.
11. Lyndon Johnson, "Commencement Address," May 22, 1964, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Lyndon Johnson, 1963-64* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1965), pp. 704-707; George Meany, "Testimony on Medicare," U.S. House. Committee on Ways and Means, *Hearings: Medical Care for the Aged, January 20, 1964* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1964), pp. 1205-1213; Ronald Reagan, "Televised Address—A Time for Choosing," reprinted in *Human Events* 24, no. 48 (November 28, 1964), pp. 8-9; Strom Thurmond, "Address on the Supreme Court Decision on Prayer in Public Schools," *Congressional Record*, 87th Congress, 2nd Session, 108, part 9 (June 28, 1962), pp. 12175-12179.
12. Robert M. Collins, "Growth Liberalism in the Sixties: Great Societies at Home and Grand Designs Abroad," in *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. David Farber (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), pp. 11-44.
13. "The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution," *Congressional Record*, 88th Congress, 2nd Session, 110, part 14 (August 5, 1964), p. 18133; Lyndon B. Johnson, "Address at Johns Hopkins University—We Have Promises to Keep," April 7, 1965, reprinted in *Department of State Bulletin* 52, no. 1348 (April 26, 1965), pp. 607-609; Paul Potter, "We Must Name the System," Washington, D.C., April 17, 1965, Students for a Democratic Society Papers, State Historical Society, Madison, WI; Donald Duncan, "The Whole Thing Was a Lie!" *Ramparts* 4, no. 10 February 1966), pp. 12-24; J. William Fulbright, "A Sick Society," *Congressional Record*, 90th Congress, 1st Session, 113, part 16 (1967), pp. 22126-22129; AFL-CIO, "Support of Viet Nam Policy," *Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the AFL-CIO, Vol. 1, Daily Proceedings, San Francisco, CA, December 9-15, 1965* (Washington, DC: AFL-CIO), pp. 561-570; "SDS Borders on Treason," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, reprinted in *Human Events* 25, no. 40 (October 2, 1965), p. 13.



Betty Friedan speaks at an Equal Rights Amendment rally (undated). *National Archives*



Black Panther poster, featuring Bobby Seale and Huey Newton. *Library of Congress*



Lunar Landing Vehicle rises from the moon to rejoin Apollo 11 following the first "walk on the moon," with Earth in the background, July 12, 1969. *National Archives*