

Losing Control in the 1970s

by Jennifer Rosebrook

Students continue to feel the effects of the 1970s in their everyday lives. The twin catastrophic events early in the decade—the tragic ending of the Vietnam War and the scandals of Watergate—shocked the nation and rocked the foundations of our fundamental belief in government. To many Americans—including the parents of many of our students—whatever had happened previously seemed distant and simple compared to the events of this period. Frustration and cynicism characterized the attitudes in many homes across the nation.

In addition, our students have had to confront modern scandals—Iran-Contra, savings and loans, Monica Lewinsky, Enron, Abu Ghraib—scandals that suggest that perhaps not much has changed. The voices in this chapter reflect the frustration and cynicism that resulted from the scandals of the 1970s, and in so doing, suggest that we may have opened a Pandora’s box that, for good or bad, may be impossible for us to close.

Document-Based Questions

HOWARD ZINN

1. Howard Zinn argues that “Our problem is civil *obedience*.” What examples does he provide to support this?
2. Zinn suggests that the rule of law “regularized and maximized the injustice that existed before the rule of law.” What does this mean? What example does he provide to support this?
3. How do you think the establishment viewed Zinn’s speech? What might have been the response to Zinn’s arguments about civil disobedience?

GEORGE JACKSON AND BOB DYLAN

1. George Jackson's letters provide insight into the lives of many African Americans in prison. What are some of their complaints or areas of concern?
2. What role did economics play in Jackson's complaints? What similarities or connections with the past history of African American can be made?
3. In Bob Dylan's song "George Jackson" he sings, "some of us are prisoners and some of us are guards." Which one do you identify with more? What conditions do you share with George Jackson? Explain.

ANGELA DAVIS

1. What role does Angela Davis claim prisons play in our society? Is her conclusion accurate in your view?
2. Davis writes that many prisoners (especially blacks, Chicanos, and Puerto Ricans) feel as though they are "political prisoners." What is a political prisoner? In what ways are their feelings justified? Do you believe that white prisoners could claim the same? Explain your response.
3. Davis writes, "The prison is a key component of a state's coercive apparatus." What does this mean? Do you agree or disagree? Do you think Davis adequately supports this statement? How do any of the other readings in this chapter support this statement?

ELLIOT JAMES ("L. D.") BARKLEY AND FRANK "BIG BLACK" SMITH

1. What did the Attica prisoners demand? Which demands seem reasonable, and which seem unreasonable? What was their greatest fear?
2. What conditions existed in Attica, according to Frank Smith? What kind of response would you have to those types of conditions? Is there any instance in which a riot would be justifiable?
3. How do these two writings by Barkley and Smith compare and contrast with the essay written by the scholar Angela Davis? Which is/are the most compelling and why?

LEONARD PELTIER

1. The title of the demonstration Leonard Peltier describes was Trail of Broken Treaties. How was the ending of the demonstration an ironic twist on this title?
2. How can a demonstration like this one be beneficial or harmful to a movement?
3. What do you think the government's response should have been to this situation? Explain your response.

SELECT COMMITTEE TO STUDY GOVERNMENTAL OPERATIONS

1. Describe the relationship between ITT and the CIA.
2. The information in this document was a surprise to some but not to others. One of the themes is that no telling of history is neutral or objective. Apply that theme to this document.
3. What role did corporations play in shaping United States foreign policy toward Chile? Do corporations have a similar influence today?

NOAM CHOMSKY

1. What do you think is meant by "the engineering of consent"? Explain your answer by citing examples from Noam Chomsky's article and providing one of your own.
2. What connection does Chomsky make between the FBI's activities and Watergate? Do you feel that these two items are connected? If so, what might be the implications? If not, explain why.
3. What does Chomsky mean when he writes, "The FBI casts a wide net"? Why does he see this as problematic?

**Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 20,
"Losing Control in the 1970s"**

After reading Chapter 20 in *Voices*, students should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points therein. Following are five possible main points.

1. A wide variety of people in the United States began to distrust the government in the 1970s.
2. The 1970s establishment was unsure and fearful of changes in United States society.
3. After the Vietnam War, Americans became increasingly unhappy with, and more vocal about their criticisms of, United States foreign policy.
4. Because so many people were reluctant to intervene with military force abroad, the government turned to covert methods to expand its power overseas.
5. The federal government responded to protests of the 1960s and 1970s by investigating, harassing, and infiltrating groups it believed to be a threat to the social, political, and economic status quo.

Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 20, “Losing Control
in the 1970s,” and in *A People’s History*, Chapter 20,
“The Seventies: Under Control?”

If your students are also reading *A People’s History*, they should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points in Chapters 20 in both books. Following are five additional points to be stressed when *Voices* and *A People’s History* are used together.

6. Watergate, which was a serious blow to the establishment, caused those in power to turn inward.
7. After the end of the Vietnam War, United States leaders quickly looked for opportunities to re-establish their worldwide supremacy.
8. The establishment, sensing serious threats to the status quo, closed ranks, conducted public investigations, and expelled culprits, but left the political and economic system fundamentally the same.
9. The United States public’s increasing feelings of uncertainty and alienation lead to a substantial decline of optimism about the future.
10. The problems of governability of the 1970s had its roots in the social movements of the 1960s.

General-Discussion Question for *Voices*

While the following questions are designed for classroom discussion about all the voices read in Chapter 20, they can also be rewritten and included as evaluation tools.

1. The title of Chapter 20, “Losing Control in the 1970s,” suggests that someone or something once had control. If that is the case, who lost control, and why?
2. Who are “independents” in terms of the electorate? Why do you think that more people began to vote independent in the 1970s?
3. Do you believe that citizens have the right to practice civil disobedience as Howard Zinn explains it? How does Zinn’s explanation of civil disobedience compare with the theory developed by Henry David Thoreau? (See the discussion in Chapter 8.)
4. What might be some of the consequences of civil disobedience? Conversely, what might be some of the consequences for citizens if they practice civil obedience?
5. Why do you think the system “could not hold the loyalty of the public” in the 1970s?
6. Is it against the law to be a Communist in the United States? If not, how does the government justify harassing people who are openly involved with or sympathetic to Communism?
7. Why did Congress investigate the CIA and FBI in the 1970s? What did Congress find?
8. Howard Zinn writes that “We’ve never had justice in the courts for the poor people, for black people, for radicals.” How do the voices in this chapter reinforce his statement?
9. How did the voices in this chapter reinforce any of the five themes listed in “Main Points in *Voices*”?
10. Which of the voices in this chapter did you find most powerful? Least powerful? How and why?

General-Discussion Questions for *Voices* and *A People's History*

These general-discussion questions are additional questions for students who have read Chapter 20 in both books. For all questions, discussion must focus on ways the materials in both chapters help students formulate and articulate their answers.

11. What do these chapters tell you about the sanctity of the law? How, why, and by whom are our laws changed?
12. Given the political, economic, and social conditions of the 1970s, why do you think the people of the United States had become so disillusioned with the “establishment”? Cite examples from both chapters.
13. If you could retitle the chapters, what would you title them? Explain why. How would the readings support your new title?
14. If the establishment was “losing control,” in what ways could it reassert its control? Are these means legitimate?
15. The role of media in public knowledge has changed since the 1970s. What was the media’s role in the 1970s? What do you think the media’s role should be today? What benefits do the media provide to people in a democracy? What might be some negative outcomes of this situation?
16. Why were so many people reluctant to use military intervention abroad in the 1970s?
17. Why did President Nixon resign? What happened to him after his resignation?
18. What does Howard Zinn mean by this statement, “The word was out: get rid of Nixon, but keep the system” (*People's History*, p. 546)? Do you think this is what happened?
19. Who is Henry Kissinger? What role did he play in the Nixon and Ford administrations?
20. What was the *Mayaguez* affair? Why was the United States so quick to attack? How did the press handle the attack?
21. Should our government have the power to assassinate foreign leaders? Is such assassination ever justifiable?

22. What is the “human side of capitalism” to which former Secretary of Treasury William Simon referred?
23. What is “an excess of democracy”? Do you believe there can ever be “too much” democracy? Why, or why not?
24. What were the recommendations of the Trilateral Commission? Do you agree with these recommendations? Why, or why not?

Evaluation Tools

SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

These assignments can be adapted to meet any classroom need—homework, short- or long-term research projects, individual or group work. The end product should be flexible, depending on teacher interest and student abilities- papers, journals, oral reports, visual aides, and the like.

1. Examine the evolution of prisons in the United States. How have prisons changed over the past 200 years? How have they remained the same? What are some of the current issues related to prisons? How do they compare and contrast with the issues you read about in this/these chapter(s)? Reread the words of those who were imprisoned in the 1970s. Then using a search engine of choice, read some contemporary primary documents from those who have been or are imprisoned in the twenty-first century. How do their experiences compare and contrast? What do you think needs to change?
2. Read several of the primary sources related to Watergate, such as the Articles of Impeachment for Richard Nixon (1974), Nixon’s Watergate Investigations Address (1973), Nixon’s White House Impeachment Departure Speech (1974), *United States v. Nixon* (1974). Explain how these documents are influential in the writing of history for this time period. What other primary sources or documents or voices would provide a balanced view of the time period?
3. Research a local or regional juvenile or adult detention facility. When and why was it created? What type of population does it serve? Try to get an interview with an administrator or an inmate (only under direct supervision, and only with parental approval) to ask about conditions in the facility. Create

a presentation to give to your class. Relate the documents from *Voices* to that presentation.

4. Using a search engine of choice, research a social movement, leader, or issue that was active in the 1970s. What were this person's or movement's philosophies, goals, tactics, and accomplishments? Is the movement still alive? If so, how have its goals and tactics changed? If not, what led to its demise? Focus on what items have changed and what items have stayed the same in the last thirty years. What might account for this?
5. Choose a modern issue about which you feel strongly. Find several songs and/or poems that address this topic. How is the issue portrayed in the words/lyrics? What attracted you to these compositions? How do they contribute to your understanding of the issue?
6. Research the habits of voters in United States presidential elections in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. What trends can be seen? What might account for these trends? Were there any significant changes in these trends in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections? Explain.
7. Watch a feature-length film that deals with the topics discussed in Chapter 20 in both *Voices* and *A People's History*. Three possible choices might be *All the President's Men*, *Attica*, and *Thunderheart*. How did the movie(s) reinforce or refute the voices that you learned about in these chapters? What parts of the film do you feel were historically accurate? Inaccurate?
8. Many people first became aware of governmental abuses in the 1970s. Part of this new awareness was due to the Freedom of Information Act of 1974 that allowed public access to a number of previously classified government records. Research how to access and use this source. Present one declassified document that you examined to the class. Explore how this new information can be a positive or negative force in public opinion about the government.
9. The issue of corporate personhood has become the subject of increasing discussion in the twenty-first century. What is corporate personhood? Research the Supreme Court decision that granted Fourteenth Amendment rights of personhood to corporations. How did other late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century court decisions reinforce corporate personhood? Do you think corporations should have the same rights as people? What resistance actions challenging corporate person-

hood have begun to take place across the nation? Do you support these actions? How and why?

10. Find out more information about the election of Salvador Allende to the presidency of Chile. What role did the CIA play in his assassination? Do you think that United States involvement was justified? Explain. Watch the movie *Missing*, which is a fictionalized version of the events before, during, and after the Allende era. What do you think was historically accurate about the movie? Inaccurate? What have been the short- and long-term consequences of United States involvement with the Chilean government in the 1970s?

SUGGESTED ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Watergate has left a permanent stain on the office of the president. Discuss other major effects of Watergate on the American political, economic, and social landscape.
2. Social change is never easy or quick. Do you believe that the 1960s and 1970s were the beginning of or the end of a social-change movement? Explain your point of view by citing examples from the readings. Explain how the 1980s fit into your analysis.
3. The role of corporations has increasingly come under scrutiny in United States politics. Discuss the history of the rise of corporations and their influence on government. What should be the role of corporations in United States society?
4. Howard Zinn raised the question of civil obedience or disobedience. Explain which course of action you believe was best, given the climate and issues of the 1970s. Are there any conditions under which you would alter your opinion? Explain.
5. In 1976, the United States celebrated its two hundredth birthday. In what ways had the country grown, and in what ways had it remained the same? What ideals that were expressed two hundred years ago have survived? What has been altered? What do you believe will be the case in another two hundred years?
6. Howard Zinn argued that resistance movements of the 1970s were motivated by “the principles and aims and spirit of the Declaration of Independence.”

Explain what he meant. What do you believe to be the principles, aims, and spirit embodied in the Declaration? Do you feel that any of these have been compromised in the early twenty-first century? How and why?

7. Many of the voices in this/these chapter(s) talk about racism within the criminal-justice system. Provide specific examples from the readings of such racism. Do you think this situation has changed over the past 30 years? How and why?
8. What voices of resistance in Chapter 20 in both *Voices* and *A People's History* were of most interest to you? How and why? Which did you find most compelling and why? Least compelling?
9. What do you think are the government's rights and responsibilities? Should these change if a political or economic crisis occurs? Explain. What are our rights and responsibilities as citizens? How do they compare and contrast with those of the government? How do the voices in this/these chapter(s) better help you understand the issue of rights and responsibilities?
10. Howard Zinn quotes Samuel Huntington, a writer of a portion of the Trilateral Commission Report "The Governability of Democracies," as stating that the United States had developed "an excess of democracy" and that there might be "desirable limits to the extension of political democracy" (*People's History*, p. 560). Given the events of the late 1960s and early 1970s, is this a valid statement? Use specific examples from the reading to defend your response.
11. Some have said that the United States was on the verge of a domestic revolution in the early 1970s. What evidence can be seen from the readings? If a revolution had occurred, where and with what group do you believe it would have begun? Explain why.
12. Howard Zinn writes, "Corporate influence on the White House is a permanent factor of the American system" (*People's History*, p. 547). Defend or refute this statement using materials from the reading. How was this particularly true during this 1970s—or was it?
13. Howard Zinn writes that the effort behind the 1976 bicentennial celebration "suggests that it was seen as a way of restoring American patriotism." Defend or refute this observation. What events, if any, do you believe similarly galvanized American patriotism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries?

SIMULATIONS AND OTHER CREATIVE APPROACHES

1. Convene a session of the committee that investigated COINTELPRO. Your committee has called J. Edgar Hoover to testify. Using primary documents you found online, question Hoover about the FBI's actions in regard to one issue surrounding the controversial operations of the COINTELPRO program. After Hoover's questioning, decide whether or not the committee will recommend to the president that he be fired or retained.
2. Watch the movie *Fog of War*, in which former Secretary of State Robert McNamara retrospectively reflects upon the role of the United States in Vietnam. Imagine that you are writing the script for a similar retrospective analysis of the 1970s in which you will be interviewing former President Richard Nixon and his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger. What will you call the film? What specific questions will you ask Nixon? What will you ask Kissinger? How do you think they will answer? Preview your script with the class, or actually stage the video with your classmates.
3. Imagine that you are responsible for the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 2026. Using information about centennial and bicentennial celebrations, as well as the historical eras in which they were held, create a week-long agenda for the celebration. Whom will you invite to speak? What will be the issues discussed at the celebration? Where will it be held? Who do you think might boycott the celebration? Who might hold a countercelebration?
4. Invite four of your favorite Founding Fathers to a discussion hosted by four powerful figures of the 1970s. The twentieth-century leaders want some advice about the loss of confidence they are feeling in the United States public. Stage that conversation. At another discussion, invite four ordinary post-Revolutionary United States citizens to a conversation hosted by four ordinary people of the 1970s. The twentieth-century participants want some advice about the growth of big business and corporate control as well as about their feelings that the government is out of control. Stage that conversation. Then compare and contrast the issues raised and discussed in both conversations.