

The Role of Political Protest

Activities examine how political protest drove social and political change in U.S. history from three distinct standpoints: 1) Martin Luther King, Jr. and the doctrine of civil disobedience; 2) impactful marches and demonstrations, including Black Lives Matter; 3) and how activists use books and music to express ideas for change. A Media Literacy Connection explores music as a protest art.

Standard 4.12: The Role of Political Protest

Examine the role of political protest in a democracy. (Massachusetts Curriculum Framework for History and Social Studies) [8.T4.12]

FOCUS QUESTION: What are the Different Ways That Political Protest Happens in a Democracy?








[Rosa Parks being fingerprinted by Deputy Sheriff D.H. Lackey](#) after being arrested for boycotting public transportation, Montgomery, Alabama, February, 1956

Public domain photograph from The Plain Dealer newspaper

The **right to protest** is essential in a democracy. It is a means for people to express dissatisfaction with current situations and assert demands for social, political, and economic change. Protests make change happen and throughout the course of United States history it has taken sustained protests over long periods of time to bring about substantive change in governmental policies and the lives of people.

Standing Up for Freedom Civil Rights Protests Choice Board

Frederick Douglass Write a story about Douglass's protests and compare it with his own account in My Bondage and My Freedom , p. 310. 	Elizabeth Jennings Write a newspaper article or online blog post about Elizabeth Jennings and the end of racial segregation on New York City streetcars in the 1850s. 	Ida B. Wells Create an interactive digital story about Ida B. Wells and her legal battle after refusing to give up her seat on a railroad train. 
Jackie Robinson Create a video book or movie trailer about Jackie Robinson's 1944 court martial trial for refusing to give up his seat on a military bus. 	Standing Up for Freedom Civil Rights Protests Choice Board  Need more activity ideas? Explore The Role of Political Protest in Building Democracy All eBook by Robert W. Maly and Torrey Trust.	Sarah Keys Evans Listen to a podcast interview and draw a comic strip/graphic history of her refusal to give up her seat on a bus and a court case that changed the law of the country. 
Claudette Colvin Design an interactive timeline for the Montgomery Bus Boycott starting with Claudette Colvin . 	The Freedom Riders Build a 3D monument - with hand materials or a 3D modeling tool (e.g., Tinkercad) - for John Lewis , James L. Farmer and the Freedom Riders . 	Civil Rights Protest History Examine how and why African Americans have engaged in protest throughout U.S. history and present your findings in the form of a protest song . 

(make your own copy of this choice board to remix/share/use)

The United States emerged from American protests against England's colonial rule. Founded in 1765, the **Sons of Liberty** and the **Daughters of Liberty** organized protests against what they considered to be unfair British laws. In 1770, the **Boston Massacre** happened when British troops fired on protesters. Then, there was the **Boston Tea Party** (December 16, 1773) when 60 Massachusetts colonists dumped 342 chests of tea—enough to make 19 million cups—into Boston Harbor. In 1775, there were armed skirmishes between colonists and British soldiers at **Lexington and Concord**. Three years later in the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson affirmed the importance of protest when he wrote:

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.
[\(National Archives\)](#)

Many of the most impactful events in United States history have been political protests:

- In 1848, women activists organized the [Seneca Falls Convention](#) and issued the Declaration of Sentiments, a foundational document in the struggle for women's rights and equality.
- In 1932, the Federal Government sent troops using tear gas and bayonets against the [Bonus Army marchers](#) (World War I veterans), many of whom were out of work because of the Depression who had come to Washington, D.C. to protest having not received promised bonuses for serving in the war. It took four years for them to get their money.
- In 1955, the **Montgomery Bus Boycott**, begun by Rosa Parks and activists including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., changed the course of the **Civil Rights Movement**, inspiring the 1960 **Greensboro and Nashville sit-ins**, the 1963 **Birmingham Children's Crusade**, the 1963 **March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom**, the 1965 **March on Selma and Bloody Sunday**, and many more protests that led to legislation and change for African Americans.
- Other protests in recent U.S. history include the **anti-Vietnam War demonstrations** of the 1960s and early 1970s, **Native American sovereignty** actions including the occupation of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco, the **Stonewall Riots**, the **Occupy Wall Street** demonstrations in 2011, and **School Strikes for Climate** in 2019 (A Recent History of Protest in America, *The New York Times*, June 28, 2020, p. 4).

Black Lives Matter

Black Lives Matter protests, beginning in May 2020, saw millions of people in more than 550 cities and towns across the nation engage in weeks of marches and demonstrations over the death of **George Floyd**, an unarmed African American man, by Minneapolis, Minnesota police officers on May 25, and the earlier March 13 fatal shooting of **Breonna Taylor** by Louisville, Kentucky police officers.



["Boston George Floyd Protest, Boston Common"](#)

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As people marched in the streets and in some places encountered law enforcement and National Guard troops firing tear gas and rubber bullets, the nation witnessed a remarkable set of statements about the death of George Floyd, the right to peaceful protest, and the need for racial justice, including voices from across the political spectrum:

- Former President [Barack Obama's video statement](#) in a virtual town hall (June 3, 2020)
- Former President [Bill Clinton statement](#) (May 30, 2020)
- [Reverend Al Sharpton eulogy for George Floyd](#) (June 4, 2020)
- Former President [George W. Bush statement](#) (June 2, 2020)
- Former President [Jimmy Carter statement](#) (June 3, 2020)

By the beginning of July, reported the *New York Times*, between 15 to 26 million people had participated in the protests, as shown on this [interactive map of George Floyd/Black Lives Matter protests](#). These turnout numbers would make this

the largest protest participation movement in the country's history.

Impact of Protests

Do protests impact politics and policies, including the outcome of elections? Decidedly yes, stated political scientist Daniel Q. Gillion (2020) in his book *The Loud Minority: Why Protests Matter in American Democracy*. Gillion's research questions a widely-held assumption that protesters are the only ones who want change while everyone else who does not protest is content with the status quo.

Looking at recent American history, Gillion examines what are called "high salience" protests that are large in scale, happen over time, and result in a police response. He finds that protests play an essential role in a democracy, acting as a way for a wide majority of people in the society to learn about issues that matter to protesters and begin envision what needs to change to make life better for everyone. Over the past 60 years, he notes, the two major political parties have "absorbed" and "represented" the demands of different protest groups (Gillion, 2020, p. 51). Since the 1960s, for example, civil rights has been embraced by the Democratic Party, while more recently anti-vaccine protests are directly connected to the COVID-19 pandemic policies of the Republican Party.

Protest takes [political courage](#) as well, the focal point of Standard 4.11 in this book. Go to [Topic 5.6: ENGAGE](#) to explore Knelling during the National Anthem as a form of protest.

Modules for this Standard Include:

1. [INVESTIGATE: Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Doctrine of Nonviolence Protest and Civil Disobedience](#)
2. [UNCOVER: Three Historical Examples of Political Protest](#)
 - 2.1 [The Stonewall Uprising \(1969\)](#)
 - 2.2 [Mother Jones and the March of the Mill Children \(1903\)](#)
 - 2.3 [The Standing Rock Pipeline Protest \(2016-2017\)](#)
3. [ENGAGE: How Do Books and Music Express Political Protest?](#)
 - MEDIA LITERACY CONNECTIONS: Music as Protest Art

1. INVESTIGATE: Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Doctrine of Nonviolent Civil Disobedience

Political protest is an action or a series of actions by a group of people who seek to: 1) express their disapproval of current conditions, 2) address injustices in the political system, and 3) advocate for changes in government or business policies.

[We the Voters: Do Political Protests Make A Difference](#), a video from CBS News, introduces political protest and how it can be used to create political, economic and social change.

There are two main forms of political protest — nonviolent and violent. **Nonviolent** protests involve using peaceful methods to bring about political change such as petitions, strikes, boycotts, rallies, and marches. **Violent** protests involve using aggressive methods to try to bring about political change such as acts of terrorism, destruction of property, bodily harm, and riots.

The Indian independence leader **Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi** was one of history's most famous proponents of nonviolent protest and resistance, what is widely known as **Civil Disobedience** ([Civil Disobedience Defined](#), Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Gandhi believed violence was a clumsy weapon that created far more problems than it

solved. Gandhi held that by refusing to rebel violently against British oppression, native Indians would expose the colonists as the real savages who were waging warfare against a peaceable and innocent community.



[Studio photograph of Mohandas K. Gandhi, London, 1931](#) | Public Domain

Gandhi's idea of "satyagraha" or civil disobedience is explained in these [primary sources and background information](#). Here is background on the concept of [Ahimsa \(harmlessness\)](#). There is more information about civil disobedience as a form of political protest at the *resourcesforhistoryteachers* wiki page for [Imperialism in India and South Asia in the 19th century](#).

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. adopted nonviolent direct action and civil disobedience as a central strategy for the post-World War II African American Civil Rights Movement. Nonviolence, he said, "is a powerful and just weapon, which cuts without wounding and ennoble the man who wields it. It is a sword that heals." He laid out [Six Principles of Nonviolence](#). Read more about King's philosophy in his 1957 article [Nonviolence and Racial Justice](#). Read [Walden by Henry David Thoreau](#) and [Antigone by Sophocles](#) for additional perspectives on civil disobedience.

Suggested Learning Activities

- **Post Your Dream**
 - Martin Luther King said "I have a dream that one day..."
 - What is your dream? Post a written note or create a meme expressing your dream for change and a better world.
 - For inspiration, watch ["A Dream" Music Video](#) by Common.
- **Propose a Nonviolent Solution**
 - Identify an issue or problem in your school or community. How can it be approached nonviolently?
- **Create a Protest Sketchnote**
 - Use wiki pages for information to investigate the role of protest and non-violent civil disobedience in one of the following social or political movements in U.S. history.
 - [Disability rights movement](#)
 - [Women's rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s](#)
 - [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer \(LGBTQ\) Civil Rights Movement](#)
 - [Environmental movement in the United States and Massachusetts](#)
 - [Worker Health and Rights Movement](#)
 - [Native American Rights Movement](#)

Online Resources for Civil Disobedience and Nonviolent Protest

- GRAPHIC BOOK: *Victory. Stand! Raising My Fist for Justice*. Tommie Smith & Derrick Barnes. Norton, 2022.
- BOOK: *Call Him Jack: The Story of Jackie Robinson, Black Freedom Fighter*. Yohuru Williams & Michael G. Long. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2022.
- [Defining Protest and Protest Events](#)
- [Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, and the Power of Nonviolence](#), EDSITEment Learning Plan
- [Committing to Nonviolence: A Lesson from Viva La Causa](#), Teaching Tolerance
- [Nonviolent Resistance](#), Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University
- [Lesson Plan: Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X: A Common Solution?](#), The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History (login required)
- resourcesforhistoryteachers wiki pages for Political Protest
 - [Political Protest in a Democracy](#)
 - [Margaret Sanger and Reproductive Rights for Women](#)
 - [Mother Jones, Labor Activist and Community Organizer](#)
 - [DAPL Standing Rock Sioux Uprising \(2016-2017\)](#)
 - [Accomplishments of the Civil Rights Movement](#)
 - [The Latino Civil Rights Movement](#)
 - [Post Civil War Women's Rights Movement](#)

- [The Women's Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s](#)
- [LGBTQIA Civil Rights Movement](#)

2.1. UNCOVER: The Stonewall Uprising, June 28, 1969

In early summer 1969, at the Stonewall bar in New York City, tensions between police and LGBTQIA patrons reached a boiling point. Members of the gay community, tired of being judged, ridiculed, and imprisoned (at the time, it was illegal to be gay), rose up against police harassment and brutality.

A raid on the Stonewall bar set off six days of violent confrontations between gay, lesbian, and transgender individuals and police officers. What has become known as the **Stonewall Uprising or the Stonewall Riots** ignited the gay rights movement ([The Stonewall Riot and Its Aftermath](#)).



Stonewall 25th anniversary button

[This button commemorates the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Stonewall riots, which took place in 1969. The riots erupted following a police raid targeting the gay community on June 28 at the Stonewall Inn in the Greenwich Village area of New York City.](#) Image by Minnesota Historical Society is licensed under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

Thirty years later, June 6, 2019, the New York City Police Commissioner James O'Neill formally apologized for police actions during the Stonewall Uprising. Commissioner O'Neill said that "the actions taken by the NYPD were wrong." There is more information about gay rights activism at a *resourcesforhistoryteachers* wiki page on [The Stonewall Uprising](#).

Suggested Learning Activities

- **Compare and Contrast**
 - Educators and historians use different terms when referring to the Stonewall events. The Zinn Education Project and the Stanford History Education Group have called them the **Stonewall Riots** while the Anti-Defamation League and the PBS Learning Media have referred to the **Stonewall Uprising**.
 - Which term would you use to characterize the events and why would you use that term?
- **Assess the Impact**
 - *The New York Times* called Stonewall a turning point for the gay civil rights movement.
 - Why was this the case? Why might that not be so?

Online Resources for the Stonewall Riots

- [The Stonewall Riots: What Really Happened, What Didn't and What Became Myth](#). *Daily Beast*, June 17, 2019
- [Stonewall: The Basics](#)
- [Stonewall and Beyond: Gay and Lesbian Issues](#), Thirteen EdOnline
- [Stonewall Riots 40th Anniversary](#)
- [Stonewall Uprising from PBS American Experience](#)

2.2. UNCOVER: Mother Jones and the March of the Mill Children (1903)

Mary Harris Jones, also known as "**Mother Jones**," was a labor activist who fought for the rights of child workers ([Who Was "Mother" Jones?](#)). In 1902, she was called the "most dangerous woman in America" because of her activism on behalf of workers ([The Most Dangerous Woman in America? The Mock Trial of Mary Harris "Mother Jones"](#)).



[Workers' Memorial Day](#) poster Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living. - Mary Harris "Mother" Jones
 (Credit: Image is the work of the [United States Department of Labor](#) under the terms of Title 17, Chapter 1, Section 105 of the US Code and the [DOL copyright policy](#)/ Public Domain)

In her 1903 [March of the Mill Children](#), Mother Jones walked nearly 100 miles in three weeks from the city of Philadelphia to the Long Island home of President Teddy Roosevelt, but Roosevelt refused to see them or respond directly to her demands for a reduced 55-hour workweek and the elimination of night work by women and children.



[Young Girl in a Mill, 1908](#)
 Photo by Lewis W. Hine, 1908 | Public Domain

The March of the Mill Children is credited with changing child labor laws in some states, although nationwide protection of young workers did not come about till the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938.

Suggested Learning Activities

- **Create a Child Labor Timeline**
 - [Child Labor in U.S. History](#), University of Iowa Labor Center
 - [The American Era of Child Labor](#), Virginia Commonwealth University
- **Analyze Primary Sources:** The Photographs of Lewis Hine
 - [Documentation of Child Labor](#)
 - [National Child Labor Committee Collection Photographs of Lewis Hine](#)

Online Resources for Mother Jones and Child Labor Laws

- [The Wail of the Children Speech](#) by Mother Jones
- [Short biography](#) of Mother Jones from The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations
- [Philadelphian Mill Children March Against Child Labor Exploitation](#), Global Nonviolent Action Database

2.3. UNCOVER: Dakota Access Pipeline Standing Rock Sioux Uprising

In 2016, a company called Energy Transfer Partners sought permission to build the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) through Bismarck, North Dakota. The pipeline would carry fracked shale oil from the Bakken Oil fields located in parts of Montana, North Dakota, and Saskatchewan and Manitoba, Canada. Bismarck, a predominantly White city, rejected the Energy Transfer Partners proposal so the company decided to reroute the pipeline through Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's reservation lands.

Based on the [1851 & 1868 Fort Laramie Treaties](#), the land on which the Dakota Access Pipeline was to be constructed was sovereign territory of the Standing Rock Sioux Nation. However, the federal government chose not to recognize the 1851 Treaty. Instead, the United States Army Corps of Engineers claimed that the land was theirs and the pipeline could be built through it.

As part of the project plan, the pipeline was to go underneath Lake Oahe—the main source of drinking water for the Standing Rock Sioux tribe and a main tributary of the Missouri River. This was what became the rallying cry of the members of the Standing Rock Sioux as they mobilized against the pipeline.



Letters from children at Standing Rock Community High School during the Dakota Access Pipeline protests

Credit: Image from [Becker1999](#) Licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#)

The protests delayed the pipeline project until the Trump Administration gave clearance for the project to proceed in 2017. The pipeline was completed in April 2017. There is more information at a [resourcesforhistoryteachers](#) wiki page on the [DAPL Standing Rock Sioux Uprising \(2016-2017\)](#).

Suggested Learning Activity

- **Assess the Impact**

- In what ways does the [#NoDAPL Struggle](#) against the Dakota Access Pipeline resemble long standing legacies of oppression toward Native peoples?*
- Was the fight against DAPL a failure? In what ways was it a success?*
- What does it mean to support the rights of indigenous peoples in the 21st century?*

*Questions submitted by Christopher Oo

Online Resources for Standing Rock Pipeline Uprising

- [The #NoDAPL movement was powerful, factual, and Indigenous-led. Lawsuit lies can't change that.](#) Center for Constitutional Rights
- [The Wounded Knee Museum](#) offers an interactive look at American Indian history.
- [Treaties Still Matter: The Dakota Access Pipeline](#), National Museum of the American Indian
- ["For the Future": Doing Indigenous History After Standing Rock](#), *Perspectives on History*, American Historical Association
- [A History of Native Americans Protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline](#), *Mother Jones* (September 2016)

3. ENGAGE: How Can Books and Music Express Political Protests?

Anti-War Literature and **Protest Music** are ways for writers and musical artists to convey their views of society and their visions for change.



Quelle: Deutsche Fotothek

[Street Scene in Dresden, Germany \(1945\)](#).

Dresden was the setting for Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse 5*
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Anti-War Literature

Some of the 20th century's most compelling literature address the brutalities of war and the necessities of peace:

- [All Quiet on the Western Front](#) by Erich Maria Remarque.
- *Slaughterhouse Five* by Kurt Vonnegut.
- *Catch 22* by Joseph Heller.
- [In the Lake of the Woods](#) and *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien.
- *Bomber* by Len Deighton, reportedly the first novel written with a word processor.

There is an entire genre of anti-war novels by women writers (see [50 Novels By Women Writers On Conflict, Displacement And Resilience](#)).

You can find more information about political protest at our [resourcesforhistoryteachers](#) wiki page for [Antiwar Literature and Protest Songs](#). The wiki also includes an historical biography page for [Langston Hughes, Poet, Playwright and Civil Rights Activist](#).



Billie Holiday recorded the song *Strange Fruit* in 1939 to protest violence and racism against African Americans

Credit: [Portrait of Billie Holiday between 1946 to 1948](#) from the Library of Congress/Public Domain

Protest Music

Protest music conveys ideas and emotions to change minds and provoke actions. From Billie Holiday singing the song [Strange Fruit](#) which was named song of the century by Time magazine in 1999 to contemporary rap and hip-hop artists, music is a powerful force for change for African Americans. The 2015 song *Alright* by Kendrick Lamar expresses his protest against police violence toward Black people. [Alicia Key's 2020 song Perfect Way to Die](#) was inspired by the killings of Mike Brown and Sandra Bland.

Rap artists DaBaby, Rapsody, Lil Baby, Beyonce, and Meek Mill, among others, also wrote searing songs embracing Black Lives Matter Movement. "The Bigger Picture" by Lil Baby became the most streamed protest song following the death of George Floyd.

Protest music is widely associated with the decade of the 1960s. Young people took to the streets to protest against the War in Vietnam and for civil rights for African Americans at home. Rock 'n' Roll Music was a constant soundtrack for these protests, its rhythm and beat defied convention and encouraged open expression of ideas and emotions.

Rock 'n' roll music, made famous by White artists like Elvis Presley had its origins in soul music and rhythm and blues performed by Black musicians and singers, the contributions of whom have been lost or neglected by the history books. Students today do not know about the genre-breaking work of artists like Little Richard, Bo Diddley, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Chuck Berry and more. Watch here as [Big Mama Thornton performs the song "Hound Dog"](#) in 1971.

You can discover a wide range of music expressing social themes on [American Anthem](#), an NPR series about music and change.

Media Literacy Connections: Music as Protest Art

From the American Revolutionary era to the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020, music has been at the center of expressing protest and speaking to social unrest. "[Yankee Doodle](#)" is widely regarded as the first American protest song, though it was originally written by British soldiers to mock the Americans and then adopted by the colonists as a rallying song for revolution. "[Free America](#)" was another one of the earliest protest songs, written by Joseph Warren, the man who enlisted Paul Revere and William Dawes to spread the alarm that the British were coming on April 18, 1775.

"[We Shall Overcome](#)" – first appeared as a protest song in 1946-46 as part of a labor strike by Black women tobacco workers – became an anthem of the African American Civil Rights Movement. Black artists continue to speak aggressively against White racism through music.

In these activities, you will remix lyrics from famous protest songs in U.S. history to create your own protest piece related to an issue you care about deeply. Then, you will analyze a political protest song and explore how it is used in social media today.

- [Activity 1: Remix Lyrics into Your Own Protest Song](#)
- [Activity 2: Analyze Political Songs on Social Media](#)



[Watch on YouTube](#)

Suggested Learning Activity

- **Write and Record a Protest Song**

- Choose a school, community, national or global issue you care about.
- Use any musical style: rap, folk, rock, hip-hop, country, classical
- Learn more:
 - [Protest Songs, A Musical Introduction](#), Smithsonian Folkways
 - [Teaching with Protest Music](#), *The New York Times* Learning Network
 - [Analyzing Protest Songs of the 1960s](#), The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History (login required)
 - PODCAST: [A Playlist for the Movement](#), Teaching Tolerance
 - [The Music of the Civil Rights Movement](#), TeachRock
 - [The Freedom Riders and the Popular Music of the Civil Rights Movement](#), EDSITEment
 - WIKI BIOGRAPHY PAGE: [Bob Dylan](#)
 - WIKI BIOGRAPHY PAGE: [Woody Guthrie](#)

Online Resources for Protest Through Books and Music

- [The Strange Story of the Man Behind 'Strange Fruit'](#), NPR (September 2, 2012)
- **VIDEO:** [The War Prayer](#) by Mark Twain (1904), an animated video by Markos Kounalakis (2010); Twain's response to the Philippine-American War
- [10 Best Protest Books of All Time](#)
 - **Digital Text:** [The Red Badge of Courage: An Episode of the American Civil War](#), Stephen Crane (1895)
- **Learning Resources:** [Nobody Gonna Turn Me 'Round: Stories & Songs of the Civil Rights Movement](#)
- [Who Invented Rock 'n' Roll: These are the Black Pioneers Who Laid the Genre's Foundation](#)
- **Learning Plans**
 - [Walt Whitman to Langston Hughes: Poems for a Democracy](#)
 - [The Freedom Riders and Popular Music of the Civil Rights Movement](#)
 - [The Music of the Civil Rights Movement](#)

Standard 4.12 Conclusion

Political protests can be both peaceful and violent. **INVESTIGATE** examined the philosophy of civil disobedience of Mohandas Gandhi, Henry David Thoreau, and Martin Luther King, Jr. to demonstrate how nonviolent protests can generate lasting change. **UNCOVER** looked at the labor activist Mother Jones and the March of the Mill Children, the Stonewall Uprising, and the Standing Rock Pipeline Protest as impactful events in struggles for the rights of children, LGBTQIA people, and Native Americans. **ENGAGE** asked how anti-war literature and protest songs serve as ways for people to express their ideas for change.



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