

## ■ Call for a March on Washington

**Date:** early 1965

**Author(s):** Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)

**Genre:** broadside; political tract

### Summary Overview

The document examined here is a call to arms, of sorts, urging students of the United States to stand up against the government in order to exert pressure and bring an end to the US military presence in Vietnam. Sponsored by the radical political group Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), this leaflet expresses its authors' disapproval of the military action in South Vietnam and lists various points of contention and justifications for opposing the war during this turbulent period of American history. Its contents cover economic, social, and political subjects. The march being called for was one of the first in a long line of such demonstrations designed to protest American involvement in Southeast Asia in the 1960s and early 1970s. Such marches took place in Washington, DC, and elsewhere, but the marches at the Capitol were by far the largest and garnered the most attention.

### Defining Moment

The announcement for this march came at a time when tensions in the United States had begun to reach a breaking point. At least one march in protest of the war had already occurred (as evidenced by the phrase “this latest march” in the leaflet), and the April 17 march and others like it would follow in the years to come. Such acts demonstrated the growing frustration with the situation in Vietnam and the lack of a clear end for US involvement in the conflict. At this point, the United States (along with the United Nations) had been engaged in South Vietnam for almost ten years, but had directly engaged in combat operations for less than a year (following the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution of August 1964). With the increasing military activities in the country, however, a small number of people—particularly students—had started to become less supportive of their government and the military. Protests, such as this one, became more common as the numbers of casualties and other costs of the war continued to rise.

The audience for this announcement, as noted in its opening paragraphs, is American university students. This generation of students would soon come to be known for its engagement in social and political activism, particularly concerning the Vietnam War. Appealing to this group directly, the SDS announcement advocates that each person seek to change the world around him or her in order to make it a better place. The authors considered it unacceptable to remain silent in the face of something, such as a war, with which one disagreed. The SDS wanted to mobilize the power of the population of students in order to create change in the world. The fact that students were generally of draft age (albeit typically exempt during their years of study) made them particularly aware of the hard realities of combat service in Vietnam. Still, many of them also opposed the war on philosophical grounds.

### Author Biography

The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) began in 1960 as an organization focused on addressing poverty through community organizing and political action. It quickly evolved, however, into a group opposed to the war in Vietnam, the draft, and social and political injustice. The group was student-based and student-run and had its own manifesto and agenda, concerning both domestic and international affairs. It sought, through its actions, to provide a radical critique of the status quo in areas such as racial discrimination, use of nuclear technology, and economic inequality. It became increasingly radicalized in subsequent years and lost much of its following among students and outside sympathizers. By 1969, SDS had fractured into the radical Weather Underground (eventually, the Weathermen) faction and a neo-Maoist group. During its short lifetime, however, it was at the forefront of New Left politics in the United States.

## HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

[c. early 1965]

A CALL TO ALL STUDENTS TO March on Washington to end the war in Vietnam

April 17, 1965

### THOSE WHO SAY, "GET OUT OF VIETNAM!"

The purpose of this pre-Easter March is to influence the Administration to halt United States participation in the war of aggression in South Vietnam. As you can see from the reproduction, this March will consist of a picket line in front of the White House, a march along the Mall to the Capitol where an attempt will be made to present a statement to the Congress, and a meeting to be addressed by, among others, Senator Ernest Gruening of Alaska and journalist I. F. Stone.

This latest March on Washington is sponsored by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Organized some 60 years ago, it was first known as the Intercollegiate Socialist Society. This organization hopes to develop a grass-roots movement to alter society in the United States and recently announced that it has approximately 1,400 members in 41 campuses and cities, most of which are in the Eastern part of the United States.

The current war in Vietnam is being waged in behalf of a succession of unpopular South Vietnamese dictatorships, not in behalf of freedom. No American-supported South Vietnamese regime in the past few years has gained the support of its people, for the simple reason that the people overwhelmingly want peace, self-determination, and the opportunity for development. American prosecution of the war has deprived them of all three.

- The war is fundamental a civil war, waged by South Vietnamese against their government; it is not a "war of aggression." Military assistance from North Vietnam and China has been minimal; most guerrilla weapons are home made or are captured American arms. The areas of strongest guerrilla control are not the areas adjacent to North Vietnam. And the people could not and

cannot be isolated from the guerrillas by forced settlement in "strategic hamlets"; again and again Government military attacks fail because the people tip off the guerrillas; the people and the guerrillas are inseparable. Each repressive Government policy, each napalm bomb, each instance of torture, creates more guerrillas. Further, what foreign weapons the guerrillas have obtained are small arms, and are no match for the bombers and helicopters operated by the Americans. The U.S. government is the only foreign government that has sent major weapons to Vietnam.

- It is a losing war. Well over half of the area of South Vietnam is already governed by the National Liberation Front—the political arm of the "VietCong." In the guerrillas the peasants see relief from dictatorial Government agents; from the United States they get napalm, the jellied gasoline that burns into the flesh. The highly touted "counter-insurgency" the U.S. is applying in its "pilot project war" is only new weaponry, which cannot substitute for popular government. Thousands of Government troops have defected — the traditional signal of a losing counter-guerrilla war. How many more lives must be lost before the Johnson Administration accepts the foregone conclusion?
- It is a self-defeating war. If the U.S. objective is to guarantee self-determination in South Vietnam, that objective is far better served by allowing the South Vietnamese to choose their own government — something provided for by the 1954 Geneva Agreement but sabotaged in 1956 by the American-supported dictator Ngo Dinh Diem and never allowed since. The Diem government that invited U.S. intervention was thus illegitimate, having violated the agreement that established it. The Vietnamese, North and South, have no taste for Chinese domination—these two countries have fought one another for over a thousand years. Moreover, South Vietnam is not a "domino"—the "threat" to it is internal,

not Chinese, and the greater threat to stability in other Southeast Asian countries is U.S.-inspired provocation of China, not China's own plans.

- It is a dangerous war. Every passing month of hostilities increases the risk of America escalating and widening the war. Since the '50s U.S.-trained South Vietnamese commando teams have been penetrating North Vietnam, considerably provoking the North Vietnamese. We all know of the presence of American destroyers in the Tonkin Gulf, a body of water surrounded on three sides by North Vietnamese and Chinese territory. How calm would the United States be if Cuban commandos were being sent into Florida, and Chinese ships were "guarding" Cape Cod Bay?
- It is a war never declared by Congress, although it costs almost two million dollars a day and has cost billions of dollars since the U.S. began its involvement. The facts of the war have been systematically concealed by the U.S. government for years, making it appear as if those expenditures have been helping the Vietnamese people. These factors erode the honesty and decency of American political life, and make democracy at home impossible. We are outraged that two million dollars a day is expended for a war on the

poor in Vietnam, while government financing is so desperately needed to abolish poverty at home. What kind of America is it whose response to poverty and oppression in South Vietnam is napalm and defoliation, whose response to poverty and oppression in Mississippi is . . . silence?

- It is a hideously immoral war. America is committing pointless murder.

But the signs are plain that America are increasingly disaffected by this state of affairs. To draw together, express, and enlarge the number of these voices of protest, and to make this sentiment visible, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) is calling for a MARCH ON WASHINGTON TO END THE WAR IN VIETNAM.

We urge the participation of all students who agree with us that the war in Vietnam injures both Vietnamese and Americans, and should be stopped.

The March, to be held on Saturday, April 17, 1965, will include a picketing of the White House, a march down the Mall to the Capitol Building to present a statement to Congress, and a meeting with both student and adult speakers. Senator Ernest Gruening of Alaska and journalist I. F. Stone have already agreed to address the body.

Thousands of us can be heard. We dare not remain silent.

## GLOSSARY

**guerrilla:** a member of a band of soldiers that uses unconventional tactics

**the Mall:** the National Mall in Washington, DC, a large, grass-covered area, lined by several of the Smithsonian Institution's museums and the National Gallery of Art; it is punctuated by the Washington Monument on one end and the Capitol and its reflecting pool on the other.

**defoliation:** the elimination of vegetation to gain access to an area; in Vietnam, US forces employed a defoliant called Agent Orange that proved to have lasting toxic effects

### Document Analysis

The main objections of the SDS to “the war of aggression in South Vietnam” concern social justice factors, economic factors, and the meaning of freedom in South Vietnam. As shown in the first and second bullet points, the SDS does not find the Vietnam conflict to be one that requires outside, especially American, interference. As they say, it is a civil war. This is one point of view, one not held by a wide sector of society at the time, but it bears noting. The group is calling its audience’s attention to an important question: does the United States have the right to interfere in South Vietnam’s political affairs—its struggle toward self-determination—especially when so many of Vietnam’s own people, in the form of the Viet Cong (communist opposition), are fighting against US forces? The SDS, of course, answers this question with an emphatic no. The group considered American involvement unlawful and morally reprehensible. It also regarded the American government as dishonest and deceptive in its dealings with both the Vietnamese and the American public.

The leaflet also touches on economic considerations—specifically, the financial cost of a conflict not declared as a full-scale war through an act of Congress (save via the Tonkin Gulf Resolution). They observe that great sums of money were being spent on a foreign military action, while many of the socioeconomic problems existing in the United States continued to go unchecked. If poverty and inequality are rampant, the authors argue, why not deal with those domestic issues first, before undertaking a risky foreign venture? There are human costs, too, in such a conflict. The SDS deems the many Vietnamese and American lives lost in the war not only unnecessary, but a crime against humanity. Given the use of chemical weapons, including napalm and Agent Orange, one should understand that far more damage was being done than aid was being rendered.

The document presents a number of pointed questions to its readers. One matter it takes up is the concept of freedom and what freedom means to people in the United States and those in a foreign country. The SDS states that self-determination is the only way for a country to manage its own affairs. No dictators chosen by outside powers and hated by the people should be permitted to thrive. No government hiding its actions and involved in a sea of corruption should be supported by the United States, certainly not militarily. The SDS, in other words, seeks to promote the democratic ide-

al, as was befitting the group’s name. The tone of the document, however, makes it clear that the SDS’s efforts were directed toward potentially radical solutions. Although calling on students to march, carry signs, and speak, the SDS authors note that stopping the war was imperative. The implication is that a peaceful demonstration could possibly evolve, at some point, into a more energetic form of protest.

### Essential Themes

The Vietnam War and the marches and protests against it left a lasting impression on the American psyche and on the world as a whole. As this SDS leaflet notes, it seemed a “losing war” to many, even at this early stage, and one that its opponents held to be “immoral.” The fear of communism and the government’s reaction to that fear had split the American populace. Much of the leaflet’s rhetoric is meant to persuade students who were on the fence about the war or did not pay it much heed, to wise up and recognize what crimes were being committed in their name. While not all of the antiwar protests of the era provide positive memories for the majority of Americans, they did play an important role in communicating the complexity of the conflict and the moral dilemmas that arise in such situations. Does the United States have a right to enter a foreign country and work to prop up a despised government, or does such action violate the democratic ideal? Is it acceptable to sacrifice great amounts of blood and money in pursuit of a program to defeat communism wherever it takes hold? The April 1965 March on Washington proved to be a significant affair, attracting some 15,000 protesters. Later events continued to draw large crowds of activists and the curious.

As the concluding lines of the leaflet show, when a group works together in a concerted effort, “Thousands of us can be heard.” Thus, in the short-term, antiwar protesters tried to end the war—without doing so directly. Yet thousands of protests since have been founded on a similar premise—that and the notion that “we dare not remain silent.” Although the SDS fractured and soon disappeared, many of its former members and those participating in its demonstrations remained active in progressive politics or pursued careers in the areas of social justice and community organizing.

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