HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS (1929–1957)
FEATURED IN Teaching U.S. History Thematically
Document-Based Lessons for the Secondary Classroom

Rosalie Metro
Event: Great Depression, 1929–1939

Document: The New Deal, Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1932

There are two ways of viewing the Government’s duty in matters affecting economic and social life. The first sees to it that a favored few are helped and hopes that some of their prosperity will leak through, sift through, to labor, to the farmer, to the small business man. . . . But it is not and never will be the theory of the Democratic Party. . . .

Now it is inevitable . . . that the main issue of this campaign should revolve about the clear fact of our economic condition, a depression so deep that it is without precedent in modern history. . . .

For three long years I have been going up and down this country preaching that Government—Federal and State and local—costs too much. I shall not stop that preaching. As an immediate program of action we must abolish useless offices. We must eliminate unnecessary functions of Government. . . . We must merge, we must consolidate subdivisions of Government, and, like the private citizen, give up luxuries which we can no longer afford. . . .

I have favored the use of certain types of public works as a further emergency means of stimulating employment and the issuance of bonds to pay for such public works, but I have pointed out that no economic end is served if we merely build without building for a necessary purpose. . . .

Just as one example, we know that a very hopeful and immediate means of relief, both for the unemployed and for agriculture, will come from a wide plan of the converting of many millions of acres of marginal and unused land into timberland through reforestation. There are tens of millions of acres east of the Mississippi River alone in abandoned farms, in cut-over land, now growing up in worthless brush. . . . We face a future of soil erosion and timber famine. It is clear that economic foresight and immediate employment march hand in hand in the call for the reforestation of these vast areas.

In so doing, employment can be given to a million men. That is the kind of public work that is self-sustaining. . . .

My program, of which I can only touch on these points, is based upon this simple moral principle: the welfare and the soundness of a Nation depend first upon what the great mass of the people wish and need; and second, whether or not they are getting it. . . . Yes, when—not if—when we get the chance, the Federal Government will assume bold leadership in distress relief.

. . . I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people. Let us all here assembled constitute ourselves prophets of a new order of competence and of courage. This is more than a political campaign; it is a call to arms. Give me your help, not to win votes alone, but to win in this crusade to restore America to its own people.


**Event:** Bonus Army protests, 1932

**Document:** Statement on the Justice Department Investigation of the Bonus Army, Herbert Hoover, 1932

This experience demonstrates that it is intolerable that organized bodies of men having a grievance or demand upon the Government should be allowed to encamp in the city and attempt to live off the community like soldiers billeted in an enemy country. Attempts by such groups to intimidate or coerce Congress into granting their demands hurt rather than help their cause, and can only end as this one did, in riot and disorder. The available facts demonstrate that the bonus marchers who remained in the city after Congress adjourned represented no fair cross-section of ex-service men. Prior to the adjournment of Congress, law-abiding ex-service men dominated this gathering and preserved order. Afterwards, the proportion of disorderly and criminal elements among these men steadily increased. Such of their leaders as were well-intentioned lost control over them entirely. It is appalling to think of the disorder and bloodshed that would have occurred if darkness had fallen on the city with the police hopelessly overwhelmed at the scene of the disturbance, and the balance of the community without police protection. The prompt use of the military to outnumber and overawe the disturbors prevented a calamity. The principal reason why the Federal Government was given exclusive jurisdiction over the Capital City was to enable it to preserve order at the seat of government and to protect the Congress and other public officials from unlawful interference while in the discharge of their duties. The right peaceably to petition Congress for redress of alleged grievances does not include assemblage of disorderly thousands at the seat of the government for purposes of coercion.

Event: United States in World War II, 1941–1945

Document: Day of Infamy, Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1941

Mr. Vice President, Mr. Speaker, Members of the Senate, and of the House of Representatives: Yesterday, December 7th, 1941—a date which will live in infamy—the United States of America was suddenly and deliberately attacked by naval and air forces of the Empire of Japan. The United States was at peace with that nation and, at the solicitation of Japan, was still in conversation with its government and its emperor looking toward the maintenance of peace in the Pacific.

Indeed, one hour after Japanese air squadrons had commenced bombing in the American island of Oahu, the Japanese ambassador to the United States and his colleague delivered to our Secretary of State a formal reply to a recent American message. And while this reply stated that it seemed useless to continue the existing diplomatic negotiations, it contained no threat or hint of war or of armed attack. It will be recorded that the distance of Hawaii from Japan makes it obvious that the attack was deliberately planned many days or even weeks ago. During the intervening time, the Japanese government has deliberately sought to deceive the United States by false statements and expressions of hope for continued peace. The attack yesterday on the Hawaiian islands has caused severe damage to American naval and military forces. I regret to tell you that very many American lives have been lost. In addition, American ships have been reported torpedoed on the high seas between San Francisco and Honolulu.

Yesterday, the Japanese government also launched an attack against Malaya. Last night, Japanese forces attacked Hong Kong. Last night, Japanese forces attacked Guam. Last night, Japanese forces attacked the Philippine Islands. Last night, the Japanese attacked Wake Island. And this morning, the Japanese attacked Midway Island.

Japan has, therefore, undertaken a surprise offensive extending throughout the Pacific area. The facts of yesterday and today speak for themselves. The people of the United States have already formed their opinions and well understand the implications to the very life and safety of our nation. As commander in chief of the Army and Navy, I have directed that all measures be taken for our defense. But always will our whole nation remember the character of the onslaught against us.

No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.

I believe that I interpret the will of the Congress and of the people when I assert that we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost, but will make it very certain that this form of treachery shall never again endanger us. Hostilities exist. There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory, and our interests are in grave danger. With confidence in our armed forces, with the unbounding determination of our people, we will gain the inevitable triumph—so help us God. I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December 7th, 1941, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese empire.

**Event:** United States in World War II, 1941–1945

**SHORTENED Document (See Chapter 7):** Day of Infamy, Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1941

I believe that I interpret the will of the Congress and of the people when I assert that we will not only defend ourselves to the uttermost, but will make it very certain that this form of treachery shall never again endanger us. Hostilities exist. There is no blinking at the fact that our people, our territory, and our interests are in grave danger. With confidence in our armed forces, with the unbounding determination of our people, we will gain the inevitable triumph—so help us God. I ask that the Congress declare that since the unprovoked and dastardly attack by Japan on Sunday, December 7th, 1941, a state of war has existed between the United States and the Japanese empire.

**Event:** Japanese internment, 1942–1946

**Document:** Executive Order 9066, Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1942

Whereas the successful prosecution of the war requires every possible protection against espionage and against sabotage to national-defense material, national-defense premises, and national-defense utilities as defined in Section 4, Act of April 20, 1918, . . .

Now, therefore, by virtue of the authority vested in me as President of the United States, and Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy, I hereby authorize and direct the Secretary of War, and the Military Commanders whom he may from time to time designate, whenever he or any designated Commander deems such action necessary or desirable, to prescribe military areas in such places and of such extent as he or the appropriate Military Commander may determine, from which any or all persons may be excluded, and with respect to which, the right of any person to enter, remain in, or leave shall be subject to whatever restrictions the Secretary of War or the appropriate Military Commander may impose in his discretion. The Secretary of War is hereby authorized to provide for residents of any such area who are excluded therefrom, such transportation, food, shelter, and other accommodations as may be necessary, in the judgment of the Secretary of War or the said Military Commander, and until other arrangements are made, to accomplish the purpose of this order.

Event: Creation of the United Nations, 1945

Document: The Struggle for Human Rights, Eleanor Roosevelt, 1948

I have come this evening to talk with you on one of the greatest issues of our time—that is the preservation of human freedom. . . . I have chosen to discuss it in the early days of the General Assembly because the issue of human liberty is decisive for the settlement of outstanding political differences and for the future of the United Nations.

The decisive importance of this issue was fully recognized by the founders of the United Nations at San Francisco. . . . In the preamble to the Charter the keynote is set when it declares: “We the people of the United Nations determined . . . to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and . . . to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.” This reflects the basic premise of the Charter that the peace and security of mankind are dependent on mutual respect for the rights and freedoms of all.

One of the purposes of the United Nations is declared in article 1 to be: “to achieve international cooperation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.” . . .

The Declaration has come from the Human Rights Commission with unanimous acceptance except for four abstentions—the U.S.S.R., Yugoslavia, Ukraine, and Byelorussia. The reason for this is a fundamental difference in the conception of human rights as they exist in these states and in certain other Member States in the United Nations. . . .

The U.S.S.R. Representatives assert that they already have achieved many things which we, in what they call the “bourgeois democracies” cannot achieve because their government controls the accomplishment of these things. Our government seems powerless to them because, in the last analysis, it is controlled by the people. They would not put it that way—they would say that the people in the U.S.S.R. control their government by allowing their government to have certain absolute rights. We, on the other hand, feel that certain rights can never be granted to the government, but must be kept in the hands of the people. . . .

The place to discuss the issue of human rights is in the forum of the United Nations. The United Nations has been set up as the common meeting ground for nations, where we can consider together our mutual problems and take advantage of our differences in experience. It is inherent in our firm attachment to democracy and freedom that we stand always ready to use the fundamental democratic procedures of honest discussion and negotiation. It is now as always our hope that despite the wide differences in approach we face in the world today, we can with mutual good faith in the principles of the United Nations Charter, arrive at a common basis of understanding. . . . As one of the Delegates from the United States I pray Almighty God that we may win another victory here for the rights and freedoms of all men.

Event: Cold War, 1946–1991

Document: Inaugural address, John F. Kennedy, 1961

The world is very different now [from how it was when the United States was founded]. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe—the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God.

We dare not forget today that we are the heirs of that first revolution. Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans—born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage, and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world.

To those people in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required—not because the Communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.

Finally, to those nations who would make themselves our adversary, we offer not a pledge but a request: that both sides begin anew the quest for peace, before the dark powers of destruction unleashed by science engulf all humanity in planned or accidental self-destruction.

Now the trumpet summons us again—not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need—not as a call to battle, though embattled we are—but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, “rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation,” a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself.

Can we forge against these enemies a grand and global alliance, North and South, East and West, that can assure a more fruitful life for all mankind? Will you join in that historic effort?

In the long history of the world, only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility—I welcome it. I do not believe that any of us would exchange places with any other people or any other generation. The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it. And the glow from that fire can truly light the world. And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world, ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.

**Event:** Truman Doctrine, 1947  

**Document:** Truman Doctrine, Harry Truman, 1947

One of the primary objectives of the foreign policy of the United States is the creation of conditions in which we and other nations will be able to work out a way of life free from coercion. This was a fundamental issue in the war with Germany and Japan. Our victory was won over countries which sought to impose their will, and their way of life, upon other nations.

The peoples of a number of countries of the world have recently had totalitarian regimes forced upon them against their will. The Government of the United States has made frequent protests against coercion and intimidation, in violation of the Yalta Agreement, in Poland, Rumania, and Bulgaria. . . .

At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life. The choice is too often not a free one. One way of life is based upon the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression. The second way of life is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority. It relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio, fixed elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms.

I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures. I believe that we must assist free peoples to work out their own destinies in their own way. I believe that our help should be primarily through economic and financial aid which is essential to economic stability and orderly political processes.

The world is not static, and the status quo is not sacred. But we cannot allow changes in the status quo in violation of the Charter of the United Nations by such methods as coercion, or by such subterfuges as political infiltration. In helping free and independent nations to maintain their freedom, the United States will be giving effect to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

**Event:** McCarthy era, 1950–1956

**Document:** Testimony of Paul Robeson before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1956

Mr. ARENS: Are you now a member of the Communist Party? . . .

Mr. ROBESON: What do you mean by the Communist Party? As far as I know it is a legal party like the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. Do you mean a party of people who have sacrificed for my people, and for all Americans and workers, that they can live in dignity? Do you mean that party?

Mr. ARENS: Are you now a member of the Communist Party?

Mr. ROBESON: Would you like to come to the ballot box when I vote and take out the ballot and see?

Mr. ARENS: Mr. Chairman, I respectfully suggest that the witness be ordered and directed to answer that question. . . .

Mr. ROBESON: I stand upon the Fifth Amendment of the American Constitution. . . .

Mr. ARENS: Do you honestly apprehend that if you told this Committee truthfully—

Mr. ROBESON: I have no desire to consider anything. I invoke the Fifth Amendment, and it is none of your business what I would like to do, and I invoke the Fifth Amendment. And forget it.

THE CHAIRMAN: You are directed to answer that question.

Mr. ROBESON: I invoke the Fifth Amendment, and so I am answering it, am I not? . . .

THE CHAIRMAN: The answer is yes?

Mr. ROBESON: Nothing could make me prouder than to know him.

THE CHAIRMAN: That answers the question.

Mr. ARENS: Did I understand you to laud his patriotism?

Mr. ROBESON: I say that he is as patriotic an American as there can be, and you gentlemen belong with the Alien and Sedition Acts, and you are the nonpatriots, and you are the un-Americans, and you ought to be ashamed of yourselves.

*Source:* History Matters. (n.d.). “You are the un-Americans, and you ought to be ashamed of yourselves.” Retrieved from historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6440
**Event:** Brown v. Board of Education, 1954

**Document:** Brown v. Board of Education, Supreme Court, 1954

Segregation of white and Negro children in the public schools of a State solely on the basis of race, pursuant to state laws permitting or requiring such segregation, denies to Negro children the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment—even though the physical facilities and other “tangible” factors of white and Negro schools may be equal. . . .

Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law, for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn. Segregation with the sanction of law, therefore, has a tendency to [retard] the educational and mental development of negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racially integrated school system.

Whatever may have been the extent of psychological knowledge at the time of Plessy v. Ferguson, this finding is amply supported by modern authority. Any language in Plessy v. Ferguson contrary to this finding is rejected.

We conclude that, in the field of public education, the doctrine of “separate but equal” has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are, by reason of the segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. This disposition makes unnecessary any discussion whether such segregation also violates the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

**Event:** Civil rights movement, 1954–1968

**Document:** Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam, Martin Luther King Jr., 1967

Due to a permissions issue, the document excerpt cannot be presented here, but can be viewed at lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/pacificaviet/riversidetranscript.html.

Excerpt from “Now, let me make it clear in the beginning,” to “such cruel manipulation of the poor.”


**SHORTENED Document (See Chapter 7):** Why I Am Opposed to the War in Vietnam, Martin Luther King Jr., 1967

Excerpt from “We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by society” to “But we realize that they would hardly live on the same block in Chicago or Atlanta.”
Event: COINTELPRO founded, 1956

Document: Church Report on COINTELPRO, 1976

COINTELPRO is the FBI acronym for a series of covert action programs directed against domestic groups. In these programs, the Bureau went beyond the collection of intelligence to secret action defined to “disrupt” and “neutralize” target groups and individuals. The techniques were adopted wholesale from wartime counterintelligence, and ranged from the trivial (mailing reprints of Reader’s Digest articles to college administrators) to the degrading (sending anonymous poison-pen letters intended to break up marriages) and the dangerous (encouraging gang warfare and falsely labeling members of a violent group as police informers).

COINTELPRO began in 1956, in part because of frustration with Supreme Court rulings limiting the Government’s power to proceed overtly against dissident groups; it ended in 1971 with the threat of public exposure. In the intervening 15 years, the Bureau conducted a sophisticated vigilante operation aimed squarely at preventing the exercise of First Amendment rights of speech and association, on the theory that preventing the growth of dangerous groups and the propagation of dangerous ideas would protect the national security and deter violence.

Many of the techniques used would be intolerable in a democratic society even if all of the targets had been involved in violent activity, but COINTELPRO went far beyond that. The unexpressed major premise of the programs was that a law enforcement agency has the duty to do whatever is necessary to combat perceived threats to the existing social and political order . . . “Covert action” is the label applied to clandestine activities intended to influence political choices and social values . . .

B. Who Were the Targets? 1. The Five Targeted Groups

The Bureau’s covert action programs were aimed at five perceived threats to domestic tranquility: the “Communist Party, USA” program (1956–71); the “Socialist Workers Party” program (1961–69); the “White Hate Group” [e.g., the Klan] program (1964–71); the “Black Nationalist-Hate Group” program [e.g., the Black Panther Party] (1967–71); and the “New Left” program [e.g., communists/socialists] (1968–71).

. . . On March 4, 1968, the program was expanded. . . . The letter expanding the program lists five long-range goals for the program: (1) to prevent the “coalition of militant black nationalistic groups,” . . . ; (2) to prevent the rise of a “messiah” who could “unify, and electrify,” the movement, naming specifically Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael, and Elijah Muhammed; (3) to prevent violence on the part of black nationalist groups, by pinpointing “potential troublemakers” and neutralizing them “before they exercise their potential for violence”; (4) to prevent groups and leaders from gaining “respectability” by discrediting them to the “responsible” Negro community, to the white community (both the responsible community and the “liberals”—the distinction is the Bureau’s), and to Negro radicals; and (5) to prevent the long range growth of these organizations, especially among youth, by developing specific tactics to “prevent these groups from recruiting young people.” . . .

**Event:** Little Rock Nine, 1957

**Document:** Desegregation address, Dwight Eisenhower, 1957

This morning the mob again gathered in front of the Central High School of Little Rock, obviously for the purpose of again preventing the carrying out of the [Supreme] Court’s order relating to the admission of Negro children to that school. . . .

As you know, the Supreme Court of the United States has decided that separate public educational facilities for the races are inherently unequal and therefore compulsory school segregation laws are unconstitutional.

Our personal opinions about the decision have no bearing on the matter of enforcement; the responsibility and authority of the Supreme Court to interpret the Constitution are very clear. Local Federal Courts were instructed by the Supreme Court to issue such orders and decrees as might be necessary to achieve admission to public schools without regard to race—and with all deliberate speed.

. . . The interest of the nation in the proper fulfillment of the law’s requirements cannot yield to opposition and demonstrations by some few persons. Mob rule cannot be allowed to override the decisions of our courts. Now, let me make it very clear that Federal troops are not being used to relieve local and state authorities of their primary duty to preserve the peace and order of the community. Nor are the troops there for the purpose of taking over the responsibility of the School Board and the other responsible local officials in running Central High School. The running of our school system and the maintenance of peace and order in each of our States are strictly local affairs and the Federal Government does not interfere except in a very few special cases and when requested by one of the several States. In the present case the troops are there, pursuant to law, solely for the purpose of preventing interference with the orders of the Court.

**Event:** Little Rock Nine, 1957

**Document:** Speech on School Integration, Orval Faubus, 1958

Last year, I stated during the September crisis that I was not elected Governor of Arkansas to surrender all our rights as citizens to an all-powerful federal autocracy. . . . It is my responsibility, and it is my purpose and determination, to defend the constitutional rights of the people of Arkansas to the full extent of my ability. . . .

It was with a heavy heart that I found it necessary to sign the bills of the Extraordinary Session of the General Assembly and to close the High Schools in the City of Little Rock. I took this action only after the last hope of relief from an intolerable situation had been exhausted. The Supreme Court shut its eyes to all the facts, and in essence said—integration at any price, even if it means the destruction of our school system, our educational processes, and the risk of disorder and violence that could result in the loss of life—perhaps yours. . . .

First. The federal government has no authority to require any state to operate public schools. Second. The federal government has no authority to tell a state government for what purposes it may levy taxes, or how the tax money may be expended. . . . Once again I am compelled to point out to the people of this city, this state, this nation, and the world, if you please, that our objective has been to maintain the peace and good order of the community. As long as there is a legal way, as I have outlined, to maintain the peace and good order and a suitable educational system, I will not shirk from my duty and responsibility. . . .

Some people dread, shrink from, and grow weary of the struggle in which we are now engaged. I grow weary, also, but is there any choice? Once integration is effected totally and completely, will the peace and harmony you desire be attained? If we are to judge by the results elsewhere, anywhere, once total, or near total integration is effected, the peace, the quiet, the harmony, the pride in our schools, and even the good relations that existed heretofore between the races here, will be gone forever.