

## Primary Source Reading 18-1 ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

## Students for a Democratic Society

### ▣ About the Selection

Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was the first of the 1960s student movement organizations. When it declared its principles in the Port Huron Statement of 1962, excerpted below, the war in Vietnam had not become a national issue and no one had heard the word *hippie*. By the mid-1960s, however, the SDS had become the militant, vanguard organization among young activists who called themselves the New Left. The New Left was a broad anti-establishment social movement that emphasized rights and power for what it perceived as the oppressed—minorities,

### Reader's Dictionary



**abhorrent:** extremely repugnant  
**fraternity:** brotherhood  
**stultifying:** to have a dulling effect

women, gays, and other groups. The SDS led many of the university takeovers in the 1960s and was deeply involved in the protests against the war in Vietnam.

### GUIDED READING

As you read, identify the issues that most disturbed those who issued the Port Huron Statement. Then answer the questions that follow.

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**W**e are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit. . . . Freedom and equality for each individual, government of, by, and for the people—these American values we found good, principles by which we would live as men. Many of us began maturing in complacency.

As we grew, our comfort was penetrated by events too troubling to dismiss. First, the permeating and victimizing fact of human degradation, symbolized by the Southern struggle against racial bigotry, compelled most of us from silence to activism. Second, the enclosing fact of the Cold War, symbolized by the presence of the Bomb. . . . We might deliberately ignore, or avoid, or fail to feel all other human problems, but not these two, for these were too immediate and crushing in their impact, too challenging in the demand that we as individuals take the responsibility for encounter and resolution.

. . . [W]e began to see complicated and disturbing paradoxes in our surrounding America. The declaration "all men are created equal . . ." rang hollow before the facts of Negro life in the South and the big cities of the North. The proclaimed peaceful intentions of the United States contradicted its economic and military investments in the Cold War status quo.

Our work is guided by the sense that we may be the last generation in the experiment with living. . . . We ourselves are imbued with urgency, yet the message of our society is there is no viable alternative to the present. . . .

(continued)

## Primary Source Reading 18-1 (continued) ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Feeling the press of complexity upon the emptiness of life, people are fearful of the thought that at any moment things might be thrust out of control. They fear change itself. . . . The search for truly democratic alternatives to the present, and a commitment to social experimentation with them, is a worthy and fulfilling human enterprise, one which moves us. . . .

. . . [T]o direct . . . an analysis we must use the guideposts of basic principles. Our own social values involve conceptions of human beings, human relationships, and social systems.

We regard men as infinitely precious and possessed of unfulfilled capacities for reason, freedom, and love. . . . We are countering perhaps the dominant conception of man in the twentieth-century, that he is a thing to be manipulated. . . . We oppose the depersonalization that reduces human beings to the status of things. . . . We see little reason why men cannot meet with increasing skill the complexities and responsibilities of their situation, if society is organized not for minority, but for majority, participation in decision-making.

*Human relationships* should involve fraternity and honesty. Human interdependence is contemporary fact; human brotherhood must be willed, however, as a condition of future survival and as the most appropriate form of social relations. Personal links between man and man are needed. . . .

We should replace power rooted in possession, privilege, or circumstance by power and uniqueness rooted in love, reflectiveness, and creativity. . . .

The economic sphere should have as its basis the principles:

that work should involve incentives worthier than money or survival. It should be educative, not stultifying; creative, not mechanical; self-directed, not manipulated. . . .

that the economic experience is so personally decisive that the individual must share in its full determination.

that the economy itself is of such social importance that its major resources and means of production should be open to democratic participation and subject to democratic social regulations.

In social change or interchange, we find violence to be abhorrent. . . .

Source: *The Power of Words: Documents in American History, Volume II*. New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1996.

### READER RESPONSE

**Directions:** Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. What two situations in America woke the early SDS members from their complacency?
2. Why do the SDS members believe they might be the last generation?
3. What is the SDS position on using violence to bring about social change?
4. By the end of the 1960s, feminists within the SDS were criticizing its sexism. What in the Port Huron Statement might be an early clue to this sexism?
5. **Critical Thinking** Which of the economic proposals sounds the closest to Marxism?