

**TEACHER GUIDE**

# 1968 DOC. #6: Nixon "Law and Order" TV Commercial

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Nixon had lost his Presidential race with John F. Kennedy in part by failing to realize the power of the televised image. He did not repeat that mistake in 1968. Nixon used television professionals to manage his campaign from start to finish. His team included Roger Ailes, an experienced television producer who would later manage George H. W. Bush's successful 1988 campaign before going on to become CEO of Fox News. Frank Shakespeare, one of Nixon's media advisors, said, "For the first time a really sophisticated group of broadcast people came around a candidate and did it for television" (Adatto 83).

Nixon's winning strategy was documented in the book, *The Selling of the President 1968*, by Joe McGinnis, who was able to watch the process from the inside. McGinnis showed how every decision was carefully considered by a management team. Nixon rarely appeared in public, refused to debate Humphrey, and his team staged television events with "average citizens" who were actually all Republican supporters.

By 1968 the evening news was regularly broadcasting stories about what seemed to be a nation on the verge of a revolution. Every night millions of viewers watched gruesome war scenes from Vietnam often followed by footage of protests, marches, and urban riots. In April 1968, African American communities had exploded in rage following the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. That summer, police engaged in what was officially termed a "police riot," beating protestors in the streets of Chicago during the Democratic convention.

Long before "Law and Order" became a hit TV series, the Nixon campaign aired a series of commercials with that same name. The country was in a crisis and Nixon's commercials reflected that reality. Using the same footage that voters had become accustomed to on the nightly news, Nixon spoke to a "silent majority" of U.S. citizens, the "nonshouters" who "work in America's factories, run America's business, serve in government, provide most of the soldiers who died to keep us free" (Congressional Quarterly 209).

> **Ask** some students to pay close attention to Nixon's spoken words, others to listen carefully to the music, and a third group to focus on the imagery.

> **Play** the video clip.

**Commercial Script:**  
A POLITICAL ANNOUNCEMENT

VO | It is time for an honest look at the problem of order in the United States. Dissent is a necessary ingredient of change, but in a system of government that provides for peaceful change, there is no cause that justifies resort to violence. Let us recognize that the first civil right of every American is to be free from domestic violence, so I pledge to you, we shall have order in the United States.

THIS TIME VOTE LIKE YOUR WHOLE WORLD DEPENDED ON IT.  
NIXON

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**Nixon "Law and Order" TV Commercial**

**Video Clip**  
Length: 45 seconds

QUESTION **What feelings are evoked by the soundtrack? Why?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER The music evokes feelings of fear and anxiety.

EVIDENCE the music is dissonant and jarring

QUESTION **What messages about law and order do you get from the visual imagery?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER The images give the message that protestors are out of control, things are coming apart, and there is need for a change.

EVIDENCE fast-paced collage of protestors marching, yelling, and bleeding; police with weapons; burning buildings; destroyed mannequin's torso; broken mailbox and change machine in the streets after a riot

QUESTION **What messages does this commercial communicate about antiwar protests? What is your evidence?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Although Nixon's opening words support the right to protest ("dissent is necessary"), the rest of the commercial contradicts that message and paints protest in a negative light.

EVIDENCE Nixon's call for "law and order"; unsettling music and collage of disturbing images link protest with violence, chaos, and destruction

QUESTION **Who do you think was the target audience for this commercial? Why do you think that?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Middle-class white voters are the target audience.

EVIDENCE Nixon's "silent majority" referred to white suburban voters, traditionally Republican, who were upset by the violence in the streets and the changes in society

**FURTHER QUESTIONS**

What is meant by "This time vote like your world depended on it"?

Is this a racist commercial? Why or why not?

How did the images of Vietnam and the protest movement that were presented each night on the evening news impact the war and the election?

**ADDITIONAL INFO**

Nixon's comment after viewing one of the "Law and Order" commercials was, "That hits it right on the nose... It's all about law and order and the damn Negro-Puerto Rican groups out there" (Kamber 129).

Filmmaker Eugene Jones was the creator of this commercial and others like it. The most controversial of Jones's commercials was called "Convention" and aired the week before the election during the popular TV program, "Laugh-In." It mixed photographs of Humphrey smiling with images from Vietnam and Chicago street riots. The background music was an old Dixieland tune, "Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight."

Nixon was acutely aware of the power of the media to make or break a politician. He spoke about his own defeat by the more telegenic Kennedy in 1960 as well as television undermining popular support for the war in Vietnam and Lyndon Johnson's presidency.

**CONNECTIONS**

(see thematic listing)

**Fear Target Audience** (the "silent majority")