

During the 2005-2006 school year, National History Day invites students to research topics related to the theme *Taking a Stand in History: People, Ideas, Events*. As is the case each year, the theme is broad enough to encourage investigation of topics ranging from local to world history, and from ancient times to the recent past. To understand the historical importance of their topics, students need to ask questions about time, place, and context; cause and effect; change over time; and impact and significance. They ought to consider not only when and where events happened, but also why they occurred, what factors contributed to their development, and what effects they had on broader history. In other words, NHD projects should go beyond mere description to include analysis of information and conclusions about how the topic influenced and was influenced by other people, ideas, and events.



For National History Day projects, students must also tie their topics to the theme. For 2005-2006 NHD projects, this means that students need to define the sense in which their topics relate to taking a stand in history. A recent Internet Google search of the phrase “taking a stand” generated 278,000 web hits, and adding “history” to the phrase only brought the number down to about 86,000; clearly there are a number of different ways students might approach this task. The most obvious topic choice is to select one individual or a small group of individuals who took a stand, or to pick a specific event in which people took a stand. A second possibility is to look at a topic involving intellectual or ideological issues; to get a grasp on such a topic, a student might find it useful to hone in on how a particular political or social movement or organization expressed and acted on ideas. A third alternative is to consider the strategy and methods used to take a stand in a particular situation.

### People or Events

Examples abound of individuals who took a stand in history or events in which people took a stand for something they believed. Students may identify people who are known only locally or who are relatively obscure, such as Mrs. Jesse Depriest, the first black woman to have tea at the White House, or they may turn to nationally and internationally famous figures from history like South African President Nelson Mandela. Similarly, students might choose to focus on a little-known local or regional incident such as the 1919 Indiana, Pennsylvania coal strike, or they may choose a topic such as the Fall of the Berlin Wall that had national or worldwide impact and is mentioned in their history textbooks.

The biggest challenge for students who focus on specific people or events is to move beyond biography and description. Students might use an overarching question about **why** people took their stand to keep the project focused on context and historical significance. Most reasons for taking a stand can be assigned to one of the following three categories: taking an *ideological stand* to speak out about beliefs and opinions; taking a *defensive stand* against something perceived to be a personal threat or public menace; or taking a *protective stand* on behalf of another person or group of people who are unable to defend themselves. Rarely will students find a definitive answer to this question, so they will have to defend their answer. Focus questions can effectively guide students to the analysis and drawing of conclusions that contribute to a successful NHD project.

### Ideas

Selecting a topic related to issues or ideology will lead a student to emphasize the ideas component of this year’s theme. Perhaps a student might look at a reform movement (for example, the early American women’s suffrage movement or the more recent movement to return rights and land to aboriginal peoples in Australia), or examine shifts in thinking about religion, economics, political thought or even a combination (for example, the intersection of civil rights reform and the labor movement in twentieth century America). The student exploring an

ideological topic will want to research the underlying issues, contrasting views about those issues, and the people involved in the movement.

This year's theme also offers students the rather unusual opportunity to explore the concept that not making a decision is actually a passive form of choice: the choice of inaction. A student might choose an NHD topic involving a situation where a person or group failed to take a stand when they might reasonably have been expected to act. For example, what were the circumstances leading to Pope Pius XII's decision not to oppose Adolph Hitler before and during World War II, and how did his inaction influence subsequent events? Or how did labor leader Terrance Powderly's refusal to take a stand in the 1886 Chicago Haymarket Riot affect the future of the Knights of Labor and other aspects of organized labor and the labor movement in the United States?

### **Strategies or Methods**

In the third approach, rather than focusing on people, events, or ideological issues, students might choose as their NHD topics the type of method or strategy used to take a stand. In some situations, people literally took a stand – the witness stand – by testifying in a court of law. An excellent example of this is Mary Benson, a woman who tried to warn the government of a plot to assassinate President Abraham Lincoln and who later testified in the conspiracy trial. Other ways of taking a stand include writing letters to public officials; publishing articles and editorials in newspapers, magazines, and elsewhere; lobbying political leaders; or lecturing or speaking out in a variety of public forums. An individual might even take a stand by running for public office, so that after getting elected they can work in support of their favored causes. Participating in mass action, whether through strikes, sit-ins, demonstrations, or marches, is another method that could provide possible NHD topics related to Taking a Stand in History. Last but not least, violent forms of taking a stand (e.g., fighting for one's country in a war, or participating in a riot to protest existing conditions) offer other possible topics.

Another aspect of looking at strategies is to examine the scope and geographical focus. Was this an effort to effect change nationally, or was the stand related to local issues and/or local changes? Who was involved in taking the stand -- was it one person acting alone or a few people acting together? Looking at how a group of people managed to take a stand, even when group

members were separated by miles and language can provide students with fascinating avenues of analysis. For example, students could examine how divergent individuals and groups of people worked together to protest the human rights abuses in the Congo in the early 1900s. Often it is just as important to understand *how* people took a stand as it is to discover why they did so.

As with any NHD theme, this topic presents students with many fascinating opportunities to explore history and to learn to use a wide range of primary and secondary sources. This year's theme also offers teachers an excellent entry into philosophical discussions about personal action and responsibility. What does it mean to take a stand? When should one take a stand, and what form should that stand take? Are there situations where one is expected to take a stand? What are the possible risks and consequences that can result from taking a stand? These questions and the answers they provoke allow students to learn about themselves through the study of the past, and help reveal history's relevance to those who may not immediately be interested in studying the subject.

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**Refer to website for local contest dates and information.**

**National Contest: June 11-15, 2006**

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