

Student Handout
Oakland Museum of California
What's Going On? California and the Vietnam Era
Lesson Plan #2

1968: Year of Social Change and Turning Point in Vietnam and the U.S.

Oral History

David Harris and John Burns

In the 1960s, David Harris was a student at Stanford and very active in the anti-war movement. He was a pacifist and became famous when he was imprisoned for refusing to serve in Vietnam. John Burns is a Vietnam veteran who became the archivist for the State of California who comments on what David Harris said:

David Harris: As long as you carried that draft card it gave them permission to go out and take all those Chicanos from the barrio in L.A., it gave them permission to take the black people from Oakland, it gave them permission to let the nice white college students sit off on their own and be spectators to this process. And that somehow that permission that we were granting by our own passivity had to be broken if we were ever going to be able to stand up to the government and deny them both the political base and the actual mechanism that they needed to wage the war.

John Burns: Everyone who acted on the basis of conviction was acting from their own moral perspectives and if there is a strength to this country at all it is that we do not impose a particular moral perspective on each other. That everyone has to do what they feel is right based on their conscience, my conscience is clear. Perhaps David Harris' conscience is equally clear, but I will not accept that he operated from some kind of higher moral position than I did because I believed then, and I believe now that when I went and did what I had to do it was the right thing to do as I understood it at that time.

