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Document-Based Activities on the Cold War

Using Primary Sources and the Internet

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Détente Teacher Page

Overview:

When Richard Nixon became president in 1969, he and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, developed a new Cold War strategy. Rather than maintaining an antagonistic stance against all communist nations, Kissinger and Nixon tried for a more constructive approach in dealing with the world's major communist countries. This more flexible policy was called *détente*, the French word for "relaxation." *Détente* came to denote an "easing of tensions" between the superpowers. The first major instance of *détente* came in the early part of 1972 when Nixon became the first president to visit communist China. A few months later, Nixon became the first president to visit the Soviet Union. The U.S. and USSR soon began negotiations to limit strategic nuclear weapons in what later became known as the "SALT" talks.

Objectives:

Students will:

- trace the changes which occurred in U.S./Soviet relations in the 1960s and 1970s
- evaluate the policy of *détente*
- speculate as to the impact of the policy of *détente* on foreign policy in the 1980s and 1990s

Web Sites Used in the Lesson:

Students will review a transcript of an interview of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, which is part of the CNN "Cold War" series at (<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/16/interviews/kissinger/>). This interview of Kissinger took place in March and April, 1997. If you want to show students the actual interview, it is also available on this page as a streaming video file.

The transcript page is part of a series of pages located on the CNN "Cold War" Web site (<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/>).

Strategies:

Introduce the lesson with a short overview of Richard Nixon's "red-baiting" past. Since Nixon had earned a reputation as being strongly anti-communist, many were surprised when he decided to make visits to China and the Soviet Union in 1972. You may wish to note for the class that these two trips coincided with Nixon's reelection campaign, and occurred at approximately the same time that Nixon announced that peace was imminent in Vietnam.

Distribute the worksheets to students and allot sufficient time for them to complete the questions.

Wrap-Up:

After students have answered the questions, lead a discussion asking students to speculate on whether Nixon's policy was designed for promotion of better foreign relations with the Soviets or if the policy was designed to ensure Nixon's reelection in 1972.

Extension Activity:

Have students research and write reports on Richard Nixon's reputation as an anti-communist. Examples of this reputation can be found in the Alger Hiss case, the "Kitchen Debate," and Nixon's campaigns for House of Representatives, Senator, Vice-President, and President.

Another option is to ask students to research key players in the visits to China and the Soviet Union and role-play meetings between Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev or Mao Zedong.

Détente Student Worksheet

Introduction:

As the 1970s began, President Richard Nixon began to deal with Cold War concerns in a new manner. In a policy that came to be called *détente*, Nixon and his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, sought to ease tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and also opened relations between the U.S. and communist China. By May of 1972, Nixon had become the first president to visit both nations and also entered into negotiations with Chinese and Russian leaders.

All Web links for this lesson can be found at: <http://www.socialstudies.com/uslinks.html>

Directions:

CNN Cold War Interviews: Henry Kissinger

<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold.war/episodes/16/interviews/kissinger/>

Read the source and answer the following questions:

1. In the course of the interview, Kissinger is asked about “where the word *détente* came from.” How does he answer?

2. According to Kissinger, how did the policy of *détente* and the SALT treaty change the way in which “all of the media and the people who thought of themselves as intellectuals” and “some liberals” criticized Nixon?

3. Kissinger notes that there was a “true substantial difference” between “us” (the Nixon administration) and “many of our critics.” Describe what Kissinger saw as this “difference.”

4. Kissinger notes that he believed that “a long period of peace” benefited the U.S. more than the Soviet Union. Why did he believe this? What argument does he say critics of the Nixon administration used against this idea? In your view, was Kissinger and Nixon’s view correct? Explain your answer.

5. What two reasons does Kissinger give for relying on “back-channel” negotiations during the Nixon years? In your view, do back-channel negotiations make for effective foreign policy, or can they be problematic? Explain your answer.

6. What does Kissinger note as the significance of the SALT I treaty?

7. What does Kissinger say about the role of human rights in negotiations and *détente*?

8. In your view, was the U.S. policy of *détente* designed to ease tensions between the U.S. and USSR or was it an attempt to undermine the Soviet Union by political rather than military means? Explain your view.

