

Background Shirley Chisholm (1924–2005) was born in New York City but spent her early years living with her maternal grandmother in Barbados. Committed to education and social justice, Chisholm began her career as a teacher, later becoming the first African American congresswoman, representing New York from 1969–1983. In 1972, despite what she termed “hopeless odds,” she became the first African American woman to run for the office of U.S. President. Although unsuccessful in her presidential bid, she served seven terms in Congress, during which time she was a vocal opponent of social injustice, the draft, and the Vietnam War. She gave the following speech on March 26, 1969, to the House of Representatives.



People and Peace, not Profits and War

Speech by Shirley Chisholm

CLOSE READ
Notes

1. **READ** ▶ As you read lines 1–24, begin to collect and cite text evidence.
 - Circle the person being addressed at the beginning of the speech.
 - Underline the argument Chisholm makes against defense spending in lines 5–8.
 - Circle the loaded language Chisholm uses to describe the weapons in lines 5–8. In the margin, explain what she wants her listeners to understand.

Mr. Speaker, on the same day President Nixon announced he had decided the United States will not be safe unless we start to build a defense system against missiles, the Head Start¹ program in the District of Columbia was cut back for the lack of money.

As a teacher, and as a woman, I do not think I will ever understand what kind of values can be involved in spending \$9 billion—and more, I am sure—on elaborate, unnecessary, and impractical weapons when several thousand disadvantaged children in the nation’s capital get nothing.

- When the new administration took office, I was one of the many
- 10 Americans who hoped it would mean that our country would benefit from the fresh **perspectives**, the new ideas, the different priorities of a leader who had no part in the mistakes of the past. Mr. Nixon had said things like this: “If our cities are to be livable for the next generation, we can delay no longer in launching new approaches to the problems that beset them and to the tensions

perspectives:

¹ **Head Start:** a federal agency that offers educational programs for children age 3 to 5, and a variety of services for their families.

that tear them apart.” And he said, “When you cut expenditures for education, what you are doing is shortchanging the American future.”

But frankly, I have never cared too much what people say. What I am interested in is what they do. We have waited to see what the new administration is going to do. The pattern is now becoming clear. Apparently
20 launching those new programs can be delayed for a while, after all. It seems we have to get some missiles launched first. Recently the new secretary of commerce spelled it out. The secretary, Mr. Stans, told a reporter that the new administration is “pretty well agreed it must take time out from major social objectives” until it can stop inflation.

The new secretary of health, education, and welfare, Robert Finch, came to the Hill² to tell the House Education and Labor Committee that he thinks we should spend more on education, particularly in city schools. But, he said, unfortunately we cannot “afford” to, until we have reached some kind of honorable solution to the Vietnam War. I was glad to read that the
30 distinguished Member from Oregon [Mrs. Green] asked Mr. Finch this: “With the crisis in education, and the crisis in our cities, can we wait to settle the war? Shouldn’t it be the other way around? Unless we can meet the crisis in education, we really can’t afford the war.”

² **Hill:** Capitol Hill, the center of the United States federal government.

2. **◀ REREAD** Reread lines 9–24. How does Chisholm use inductive reasoning to support her argument? What conclusion does she draw from the evidence she presents?

3. **▶ READ** As you read lines 25–51, continue to cite textual evidence.
- Underline the opposing viewpoint Chisholm references in lines 25–33, and restate it in the margin.
 - Circle the repetitive phrase Chisholm uses in lines 42–51.
 - Underline the loaded language Chisholm uses in lines 42–51.

Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird came to Capitol Hill, too. His mission was to sell the antiballistic missile³ insanity to the Senate. He was asked what the new administration is doing about the war. To hear him, one would have thought it was 1968, that the former secretary of state was defending the former policies, that nothing had happened, a president had never decided not to run because he knew the nation would reject him in despair over this tragic war we
40 have blundered into. Mr. Laird talked to being prepared to spend at least two more years in Vietnam.

Two more years. Two more years of hunger for Americans, of death for our best young men, of children here at home suffering the lifelong handicap of not having a good education when they are young. Two more years of high taxes collected to feed the cancerous growth of a Defense Department budget that now consumes two-thirds of our federal income.

Two more years of too little being done to fight our greatest enemies—poverty, prejudice, and neglect—here in our own country. Two more years of fantastic waste in the Defense Department and of penny pinching on social
50 programs. Our country cannot survive two more years, or four, of these kinds of policies. It must stop this year—now.

Now, I am not a **pacifist**. I am deeply, unalterably opposed to this war in Vietnam. Apart from all other considerations—and there are many—the main

pacifist:

³ **antiballistic missile:** a weapon that intercepts and destroys ballistic missiles.

4. **◀ REREAD** Reread lines 42–51. How does Chisholm’s use of repetition and her use of loaded language contribute to the persuasive power of the speech? Support your answer with explicit textual evidence.

5. **▶ READ** As you read lines 52–73, continue to cite textual evidence. Underline the main argument the author makes about the need for ending the Vietnam War, and restate it in the margin.

fact is that we cannot squander the lives, the money, the energy that we need desperately here, in our cities, in our schools.

I wonder whether we cannot reverse our whole approach to spending. For years, we have given the military, the defense industry, a blank check. New weapons systems are dreamed up, billions are spent, and many times they are found to be impractical, inefficient, unsatisfactory, even worthless. What do we do then? We spend more money on them. But with social programs, what do we do? Take the Job Corps.⁴ Its failure has been mercilessly exposed and criticized. If it had been a military research and development project, they would have been ready to pour more billions after those that had been wasted on it.

The case of Pride, Inc.,⁵ is interesting. This vigorous, successful black organization here in Washington, conceived and built by young, inner-city men, has been ruthlessly attacked by its enemies in the government, in this Congress. At least six auditors from the General Accounting Office were put to work investigating Pride. They worked seven months and spent more than \$100,000. They uncovered a fraud. It was something less than \$2,100. Meanwhile, millions of dollars—billions of dollars, in fact—were being spent by the Department of Defense, and how many auditors and investigators were checking into their negotiated contract? Five.

We Americans have come to feel that it is our mission to make the world free. We believe that we are the good guys everywhere—in Vietnam, in Latin

⁴ **Job Corps:** a federally funded free education and training program that helps young people learn a career, earn a high-school diploma or GED, and find a good job.

⁵ **Pride, Inc.:** a program of food distribution for poor African Americans in Washington, DC, begun after the 1968 riots there.

6. **◀ REREAD AND DISCUSS** Reread lines 52–73. With a small group, discuss whether the evidence Chisholm presents is sufficient to support her conclusion that the government’s money is unfairly spent.
7. **▶ READ** As you read lines 74–94,
 - underline the inductive reasoning that Chisholm uses to support her claim in lines 84–94.
 - circle the conclusion she draws from the evidence she presents.
 - in the margin, restate her conclusion in your own words.


America, wherever we go. We believe that we are the good guys at home, too. When the Kerner Commission⁶ told white America what black America had always known, that prejudice and hatred built the nation's slums, maintain them, and profit by them, white America would not believe it. But it is true.


80 Unless we start to fight and defeat the enemies of poverty and racism in our own country and make our talk of equality and opportunity ring true, we are exposed as hypocrites in the eyes of the world when we talk about making other people free.

I am deeply disappointed at the clear evidence that the number-one priority of the new administration is to buy more and more weapons of war, to return to the era of the Cold War, to ignore the war we must fight here—the war that is not optional. There is only one way, I believe, to turn these policies around. The Congress can respond to the mandate that the American people have clearly expressed. They have said, “End this war. Stop the waste. Stop the
90 killing. Do something for your own people first.” We must find the money to “launch the new approaches,” as Mr. Nixon said. We must force the administration to rethink its distorted, unreal scale of priorities. Our children, our jobless men, our deprived, rejected, and starving fellow citizens must come first.

For this reason, I intend to vote “No” on every money bill that comes to the floor of this House that provides any funds for the Department of Defense—any bill whatsoever—until the time comes when our values and priorities have

⁶ **Kerner Commission:** an 11-member commission established to investigate the causes of the 1967 race riots in the U.S.

8.  Reread lines 74–83. What idea is Chisholm emphasizing by repeating the term “good guys”?

9.  As you read lines 95–105, continue to cite textual evidence.

- Underline Chisholm’s promise to her listeners.
- Circle text explaining the reason she gives for her decision.
- Underline the parallel statements that Chisholm makes.

