Recent weeks have been marked with protests by people all around the world over the violent deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and others. Protesting and rallying in response to political and social issues or conditions has been an integral part of our nation's fabric since well before its official founding. Throughout history, protest movements have at times been led and/or catalyzed by young people—including students in public schools, colleges, and universities. In December 1965, Mary Beth Tinker and a small group of students in Des Moines, Iowa, decided to protest the Vietnam War by wearing black armbands to school. The resulting chain of events culminated in one of the most important Supreme Court cases regarding the constitutional rights of students, *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* (1969). A video summary of the case can be viewed here:


**Talk About It**

In the United States, freedoms of expression continue to be guaranteed by the words in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, written more than 200 years ago. This amendment protects freedoms of speech, religion, the press, and also the rights to assembly and petition. The *Tinker v. Des Moines* decision affirmed First Amendment protection to "symbolic speech," or actions meant to convey a message, and also the right of students to express political opinions in public schools. However, the right to free speech is not without limits. Speech that is obscene or causes harm through illegal actions is not protected.

After viewing the case summary, discuss the protesting students' point of view and the school administration's point of view. What were the strongest points of the students' argument? What were the strongest points of the school administration’s counterargument? Was the Supreme Court ruling unanimous?

**Explore More**

In an interview with *The Salt Lake Tribune* in 2014, Mary Beth Tinker discusses the First Amendment and her experiences during the time of the *Tinker v. Des Moines* case:

[Mary Beth Tinker on the First Amendment](https://www.sltrib.com/2014/01/30/the-first-amendment-40-years-mary-beth)

This 2018 article from *The New York Times* details some of the important student-led protests from around the world since 1960:

[7 Times in History When Students Turned to Activism](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/03/learning/activism-student-protests.html)

*Note:* HMH is not responsible for the content of third-party websites, so we recommend that you carefully preview all third-party sites used with this lesson.