

# The Stormy Sixties

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1960–1968

LET THE WORD GO FORTH FROM THIS TIME AND PLACE, TO  
FRIEND AND FOE ALIKE, THAT THE TORCH HAS BEEN  
PASSED TO A NEW GENERATION OF AMERICANS.

JOHN F. KENNEDY, INAUGURAL, 1961

Complacent and comfortable as the 1950s closed, Americans elected in 1960 a young, vigorous president who pledged “to get the country moving again.” Neither the nation nor the new president had any inkling as the new decade opened just how action-packed it would be, both at home and abroad. The 1960s would bring a sexual revolution, a civil rights revolution, the emergence of a “youth culture,” a devastating war in Vietnam, and the beginnings, at least, of a feminist revolution. By the end of the stormy sixties, many Americans would yearn nostalgically for the comparative calm of the fifties.



## Kennedy's “New Frontier” Spirit

Hatless and topcoatless in the twenty-two-degree chill, John F. Kennedy delivered a stirring inaugural address on January 20, 1961. Tall, elegantly handsome, speaking crisply and with staccato finger jabs at the air, Kennedy personified the glamour and vitality of the new adminis-

tration. The youngest president ever elected, he assembled one of the youngest cabinets, including his thirty-five-year-old brother, Robert, as attorney general. “Bobby,” the president quipped, would find “some legal experience” useful when he began to practice law. The new attorney general set out, among other reforms, to recast the priorities of the FBI. The bureau deployed nearly a thousand agents on “internal security” work but targeted only a dozen against organized crime and gave virtually no attention to civil rights violations. Robert Kennedy’s efforts were stoutly resisted by J. Edgar Hoover, who had served as FBI director longer than the new attorney general had been alive. Business whiz Robert S. McNamara left the presidency of the Ford Motor Company to take over the Defense Department. Along with other youthful, talented advisers, these appointees made up an inner circle of “the best and the brightest” men around the president.

From the outset Kennedy inspired high expectations, especially among the young. His challenge of a “New Frontier” quickened patriotic pulses. He brought a warm heart to the Cold War when he proposed the

*Richard Goodwin (b. 1931), a young Peace Corps staffer, eloquently summed up the buoyantly optimistic mood of the early 1960s:*

*“For a moment, it seemed as if the entire country, the whole spinning globe, rested, malleable and receptive, in our beneficent hands.”*

Peace Corps, an army of idealistic and mostly youthful volunteers to bring American skills to underdeveloped countries. He summoned citizens to service with his clarion call to “ask not what your country can do for you: ask what you can do for your country.”

Himself Harvard-educated, Kennedy and his Ivy League lieutenants (heavily from Harvard) radiated confidence in their abilities. The president’s personal grace and wit won him the deep affection of many of his fellow citizens. A journalist called Kennedy “the most seductive man I’ve ever met. He exuded a sense of vibrant life and humor that seemed naturally to bubble up out of him.” In an unprecedented gesture, he invited white-maned poet Robert Frost to speak at his inaugural ceremonies. The old Yankee versifier shrewdly took

stock of the situation. “You’re something of Irish and I suppose something of Harvard,” he told Kennedy—and advised him to be more Irish than Harvard.



### The New Frontier at Home

Kennedy came into office with fragile Democratic majorities in Congress. Southern Democrats threatened to team up with Republicans and ax New Frontier proposals such as medical assistance for the aged and increased federal aid to education. Kennedy won a first round in his campaign for a more cooperative Congress when he forced an expansion of the all-important House Rules Committee, dominated by conservatives who could have bottled up his entire legislative program. Despite this victory, the New Frontier did not expand swiftly. Key medical and education bills remained stalled in Congress.

Another vexing problem was the economy. Kennedy had campaigned on the theme of revitalizing the economy after the recessions of the Eisenhower years. His administration helped negotiate a noninflationary wage agreement in the steel industry in early 1962. The assumption was that the companies, for their part, would keep the lid on prices. But almost immediately steel management announced significant price increases, thereby seemingly demonstrating bad faith. The president erupted in wrath, remarking that his



**President John F. Kennedy and His Wife, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy**  
Shown here leaving the White House to attend a series of inaugural balls in January 1961, the young and vibrant first couple brought beauty, style, and grace to the presidency.

father had once said that “all businessmen were sons of bitches.” He called the “big steel” men onto the Oval Office carpet and unleashed his Irish temper. Overawed, the steel operators backed down.

The steel episode provoked fiery attacks by big business on the New Frontier, but Kennedy soon appealed to believers in free enterprise when he announced his support of a general tax-cut bill. He rejected the advice of those who wished greater government spending and instead chose to stimulate the economy by slashing taxes and putting more money directly into private hands. When he announced his policy before a big business group, one observer called it “the most Republican speech since McKinley.”

Kennedy also promoted a multibillion-dollar project to land an American on the moon. When skeptics objected that the money could be better spent elsewhere, Kennedy “answered” them in a speech at Rice University in Texas: “But why, some say, the moon? . . . And they may well ask, why climb the highest mountain? Why, thirty-five years ago, fly the Atlantic? Why does Rice play Texas?” Twenty-four billion dollars later,

in 1969, two American astronauts triumphantly planted human footprints on the moon’s dusty surface.



### Rumblings in Europe

A few months after settling into the White House, the new president met Soviet premier Khrushchev at Vienna in June 1961. The tough-talking Soviet leader adopted a belligerent attitude, threatening to make a treaty with East Germany and cut off Western access to Berlin. Though visibly shaken, the president refused to be bullied.

The Soviets backed off from their most bellicose threats but suddenly began to construct the Berlin Wall in August 1961. A barbed-wire and concrete barrier, it was designed to plug the heavy population drain from East Germany to West Germany through the Berlin funnel. But to the free world, the “Wall of Shame” looked like a gigantic enclosure around a concentration camp. The Wall stood for almost three decades as an ugly scar

**On the Moon** (left) This moon’s-eye view of the earth greeted the first men to land on the lunar surface. (right) Astronaut Edwin (“Buzz”) Aldrin poses with a stretched U.S. flag on the windless moon. His companion, Neil Armstrong, said as he stepped from the spacecraft, “That’s one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind.”





symbolizing the post–World War II division of Europe into two hostile camps.

Kennedy meanwhile turned his attention to Western Europe, now miraculously prospering after the tonic of Marshall Plan aid and the growth of the American-encouraged Common Market, the free-trade area that evolved into the European Union. He finally secured passage of the Trade Expansion Act in 1962, authorizing tariff cuts of up to 50 percent to promote trade with Common Market countries. This legislation led to the so-called Kennedy Round of tariff negotiations, concluded in 1967, and to a significant expansion of European-American trade.

But not all of Kennedy's ambitious designs for Europe were realized. American policymakers were dedicated to an economically and militarily united "Atlantic Community," with the United States the dominant partner. But they found their way blocked by towering, stiff-backed Charles de Gaulle, president of France. With a haughty "non," de Gaulle vetoed the British application for Common Market membership in 1963, fearing that the British "special relationship" with the United States would make Britain a Trojan horse for deepening American control over European affairs. De Gaulle deemed the

Americans unreliable in a crisis, so he tried to preserve French freedom of action by developing his own small atomic force. Despite the perils of nuclear proliferation or Soviet domination, de Gaulle demanded an independent Europe, free of Yankee influence.

### **Foreign Flare-ups and "Flexible Response"**

Special problems for U.S. foreign policy emerged from the worldwide decolonization of European overseas possessions after World War II. Sparsely populated Laos, freed of its French colonial overlords in 1954, was festering dangerously by the time Kennedy came into office. The Eisenhower administration had drenched this jungle kingdom with dollars but failed to cleanse the country of an aggressive communist element. A red Laos, many observers feared, would be a river on which the influence of Communist China would flood into all of Southeast Asia.

As the Laotian civil war raged, Kennedy's military advisers seriously considered sending in American

**The Berlin Wall, 1961–1989** The wall separating East and West Berlin stood for nearly thirty years as a hated symbol of the division of Europe into democratic and communist camps. Demonstrators celebrating the impending reunification of East and West Germany began to tear it down at last in 1989.





troops. But the president found that he had insufficient forces to put out the fire in Asia and still honor his commitments in Europe. Kennedy thus sought a diplomatic escape hatch in the fourteen-power Geneva conference, which imposed a shaky peace on Laos in 1962.

These “brushfire wars” intensified the pressure for a shift away from Secretary Dulles’s dubious doctrine of “massive retaliation.” Kennedy felt hamstrung by the knowledge that in a crisis, he had the Devil’s choice between humiliation and nuclear incineration. With Defense Secretary McNamara, he pushed the strategy of “flexible response”—that is, developing an array of military “options” that could be precisely matched to the gravity of the crisis at hand. To this end Kennedy increased spending on conventional military forces and bolstered the Special Forces (Green Berets). They were an elite antiguerrilla outfit trained to survive on snake meat and to kill with scientific finesse.



### Stepping into the Vietnam Quagmire

The doctrine of “flexible response” seemed sane enough, but it contained lethal logic. It potentially lowered the level at which diplomacy would give way to shooting. It also provided a mechanism for a progressive, and possibly endless, stepping-up of the use of force. Vietnam soon presented grisly proof of these pitfalls.

The corrupt, right-wing Diem government in Saigon, despite a deluge of American dollars, had ruled shakily since the partition of Vietnam in 1954 (see p. 898). Anti-Diem agitators noisily threatened to topple the pro-American government from power. In a fateful decision late in 1961, Kennedy ordered a sharp increase in the number of “military advisers” (U.S. troops) in South Vietnam.

American forces allegedly entered Vietnam to foster political stability—to help protect Diem from the communists long enough to allow him to enact basic social reforms favored by the Americans. But the Kennedy administration eventually despaired of the reactionary Diem and encouraged a successful coup against him in November 1963. Ironically, the United States thus contributed to a long process of political disintegration that its original policy had meant to prevent. Kennedy still told the South Vietnamese that it was “their war,” but he had made dangerously deep political commitments. By the time of his death, he had ordered more than fifteen thousand American men into the far-off Asian slaughter pen. A graceful pullout was becoming increasingly difficult.



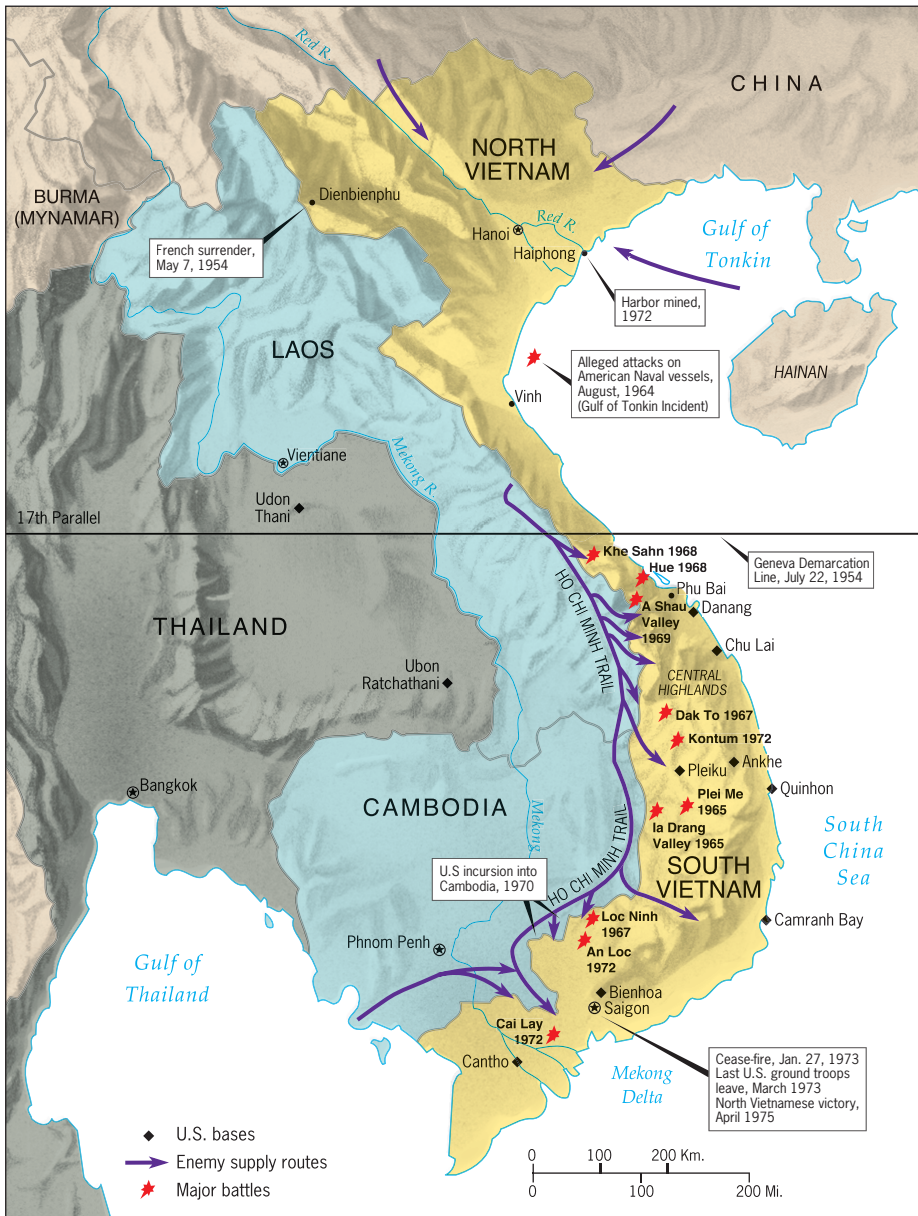
**Backbone** The United States supports South Vietnam.

“Modernization theory” provided the theoretical underpinnings for an activist U.S. foreign policy in the “underdeveloped” world. Its proponents believed that the traditional societies of Asia, Africa, and Latin America could develop into modern industrial and democratic nations by following the West’s own path. Noted economic historian Walt Whitman Rostow, one of the most influential modernization theorists, charted the route from traditional society to “the age of high mass-consumption” in his book *The Stages of Economic Growth* (1960). Though it would later come under attack for its Eurocentric bias, modernization theory offered a powerful intellectual framework for policymakers ensnared in the Cold War. Rostow himself served as an influential adviser to the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.



### Cuban Confrontations

Although the United States regarded Latin America as its backyard, its southern neighbors feared and resented the powerful Colossus of the North. In 1961 Kennedy



**Vietnam and Southeast Asia, 1954–1975**

extended the hand of friendship with the Alliance for Progress (*Alianza para el Progreso*), hailed as a Marshall Plan for Latin America. A primary goal was to help the Good Neighbors close the gap between the callous rich and the wretched poor, and thus quiet communist agitation. But results were disappointing; there was little alliance and even less progress. American handouts had little positive impact on Latin America's immense social problems.

President Kennedy also struck below the border with the mailed fist. He had inherited from the Eisenhower

administration a CIA-backed scheme to topple Fidel Castro from power by invading Cuba with anticommunist exiles. On April 17, 1961, some twelve hundred exiles landed at Cuba's Bay of Pigs. When the ill-starred invasion bogged down at the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy stood fast in his decision to keep hands off, and the bullet-riddled band of anti-Castroites surrendered. President Kennedy assumed full responsibility for the failure, remarking that "victory has a hundred fathers, and defeat is an orphan."

The Bay of Pigs blunder, along with continuing American covert efforts to assassinate Castro and over-



throw his government, naturally pushed the Cuban leader even further into the Soviet embrace. Wily Chairman Khrushchev lost little time in taking full advantage of his Cuban comrade's position just ninety miles off Florida's coast. In October 1962 the aerial photographs of American spy planes revealed that the Soviets were secretly and speedily installing nuclear-tipped missiles in Cuba. The Soviets evidently intended to use these devastating weapons to shield Castro and to blackmail the United States into backing down in Berlin and other trouble spots.

Kennedy and Khrushchev now began a nerve-racking game of "nuclear chicken." The president flatly rejected air force proposals for a "surgical" bombing strike against the missile-launching sites. Instead, on October 22, 1962, he ordered a naval "quarantine" of Cuba and demanded immediate removal of the threatening weaponry. He also served notice on Khrushchev that any attack on the United States from Cuba would be regarded as coming from the Soviet Union and would trigger nuclear retaliation against the Russian heartland.

For an anxious week, Americans waited while Soviet ships approached the patrol line established by the U.S. Navy off the island of Cuba. Seizing or sinking a Soviet vessel on the high seas would unquestionably be regarded by the Kremlin as an act of war. The world teetered breathlessly on the brink of global atomization. Only in 1991 did the full dimensions of this nuclear peril become known, when the Russians revealed that their

ground forces in Cuba already had operational nuclear weapons at their disposal and were authorized to launch them if attacked.

In this tense eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation, Khrushchev finally flinched. On October 28 he agreed to a partially face-saving compromise, by which he would pull the missiles out of Cuba. The United States in return agreed to end the quarantine and not invade the island. The American government also quietly signaled that it would remove from Turkey some of its own missiles targeted on the Soviet Union.

Fallout from the Cuban missile crisis was considerable. A disgraced Khrushchev was ultimately hounded out of the Kremlin and became an "unperson." Hard-liners in Moscow, vowing never again to be humiliated in a nuclear face-off, launched an enormous program of military expansion. The Soviet buildup reached a crescendo in the next decade, stimulating, in turn, a vast American effort to "catch up with the Russians." The Democrats did better than expected in the midterm elections of November 1962—allegedly because the Republicans were "Cubanized." Kennedy, apparently sobered by the appalling risks he had just run, pushed harder for a nuclear test-ban treaty with the Soviet Union. After prolonged negotiations in Moscow, a pact prohibiting trial nuclear explosions in the atmosphere was signed in late 1963. Another barometer indicating a thaw in the Cold War was the installation (August 1963) of a Moscow-Washington



#### Failed Bay of Pigs Invasion, 1961

The Cuban foreign minister showed United Nations delegates photographs of arms he said the United States had supplied for the Bay of Pigs invasion on April 17. The debacle was one of several unsuccessful American efforts to overthrow Cuban leader Fidel Castro.

“hot line,” permitting immediate teletype communication in case of crisis.

Most significant was Kennedy’s speech at American University, Washington, D.C., in June 1963. The president urged Americans to abandon a view of the Soviet Union as a Devil-ridden land filled with fanatics and instead to deal with the world “as it is, not as it might have been had the history of the last eighteen years been different.” Kennedy thus tried to lay the foundations for a realistic policy of peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union. Here were the modest origins of the policy that later came to be known as “détente” (French for “relaxation of tension”).



### The Struggle for Civil Rights

Kennedy had campaigned with a strong appeal to black voters, but he proceeded gingerly to redeem his promises. Although he had pledged to eliminate racial discrimination in housing “with a stroke of the pen,” it took him nearly two years to find the right pen. Civil rights groups meanwhile sent thousands of pens to the White House in an “Ink for Jack” protest against the president’s slowness.

Political concerns stayed the president’s hand on civil rights. Elected by a wafer-thin margin, and with shaky control over Congress, Kennedy needed the support of southern legislators to pass his economic and social

legislation, especially his medical and educational bills. He believed, perhaps justifiably, that those measures would eventually benefit black Americans at least as much as specific legislation on civil rights. Bold moves for racial justice would have to wait.

But events soon scrambled these careful calculations. After the wave of sit-ins that surged across the South in 1960, groups of Freedom Riders fanned out to end segregation in facilities serving interstate bus passengers. A white mob torched a Freedom Ride bus near Anniston, Alabama, in May 1961, and Attorney General Robert Kennedy’s personal representative was beaten unconscious in another anti-Freedom Ride riot in Montgomery. When southern officials proved unwilling or unable to stem the violence, Washington dispatched federal marshals to protect the Freedom Riders.

Reluctantly but fatefully, the Kennedy administration had now joined hands with the civil rights movement. Because of that partnership, the Kennedys proved ultra-wary about the political associates of Martin Luther King, Jr. Fearful of embarrassing revelations that some of King’s advisers had communist affiliations, Robert Kennedy ordered FBI director J. Edgar Hoover to wiretap King’s phone in late 1963. But for the most part, the relationship between King and the Kennedys was a fruitful one. Encouraged by Robert Kennedy, and with financial backing from Kennedy-prodded private foundations, SNCC and other civil rights groups inaugurated the Voter Education Project to register the South’s historically disfranchised blacks. Because of his support for civil



#### Freedom Ride, 1961

Rampaging whites near Anniston, Alabama, burned this bus carrying an interracial group of Freedom Riders on May 14, 1961.



*In his civil rights address of June 11, 1963, President John F. Kennedy (1917–1963) said, “If an American, because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch in a restaurant open to the public; if he cannot send his children to the best public school available; if he cannot vote for the public officials who represent him; if, in short, he cannot enjoy the full and free life which all of us want, then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place?”*

rights, President Kennedy told a group of black leaders in 1963, “I may lose the next election . . . I don’t care.”

Integrating southern universities threatened to provoke wholesale slaughter. Some desegregated painlessly, but the University of Mississippi (“Ole Miss”) became a volcano. A twenty-nine-year-old air force veteran, James Meredith, encountered violent opposition when he attempted to register in October 1962. In the end President Kennedy was forced to send in 400 federal marshals and 3,000 troops to enroll Meredith in his first class—in colonial American history.

In the spring of 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., launched a campaign against discrimination in Birmingham, Alabama, the most segregated big city in America. Although blacks constituted nearly half of the city’s population, they made up fewer than 15 percent of the city’s voters. Previous attempts to crack the city’s rigid racial barriers had produced more than fifty cross burnings and eighteen bomb attacks since 1957. “Some of the people sitting here will not come back alive from this campaign,” King advised his organizers. Events soon confirmed this grim prediction of violence. Watching developments on television screens, a horrified world saw peaceful civil rights marchers repeatedly repelled by police with attack dogs and electric cattle prods. Most fearsome of all were the high-pressure water hoses directed at the civil rights demonstrators. They delivered water with enough force to knock bricks loose from buildings or strip bark from trees at a distance of one hundred feet. Water from the hoses bowled little children down the street like tumbleweeds.

Jolted by these vicious confrontations, President Kennedy delivered a memorable televised speech to the nation on June 11, 1963. In contrast to Eisenhower’s cool aloofness from the racial question, Kennedy called the situation a “moral issue” and committed his personal and presidential prestige to finding a solution. Drawing on the same spiritual traditions as Martin Luther King, Jr., Kennedy declared that the principle at stake “is as old as the Scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution.” He called for new civil rights legislation



**Hosing Down Civil Rights Demonstrators, Birmingham, Alabama, 1963**



**Martin Luther King, Jr., Addresses the March on Washington, August 1963**

This was the occasion of King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech, in which he declared, "When the architects of our great republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

to protect black citizens. In August King led 200,000 black and white demonstrators on a peaceful "March on Washington" in support of the proposed legislation. In an electrifying speech from the Lincoln Memorial, King declared, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

Still the violence continued. On the very night of Kennedy's stirring television address, a white gunman shot down Medgar Evers, a black Mississippi civil rights worker. In September 1963 an explosion blasted a Baptist church in Birmingham, killing four black girls who had just finished their lesson called "The Love That Forgives." By the time of Kennedy's death, his civil rights bill was making little headway, and frustrated blacks were growing increasingly impatient.



**The Killing of Kennedy**

Violence haunted America in the mid-1960s, and it stalked onto center stage on November 22, 1963. While riding in an open limousine in downtown Dallas, Texas, President Kennedy was shot in the brain by a concealed rifleman and died within seconds. As a stunned nation grieved, the tragedy grew still more unbelievable. The alleged assassin, a furtive figure named Lee Harvey

Oswald, was himself shot to death in front of television cameras by a self-appointed avenger, Jack Ruby. So bizarre were the events surrounding the two murders that even an elaborate official investigation conducted by Chief Justice Warren could not quiet all doubts and theories about what had really happened.

Vice President Johnson was promptly sworn in as president on a waiting airplane and flown back to Washington with Kennedy's body. Although he mistrusted "the Harvards," Johnson retained most of the bright Kennedy team. The new president managed a dignified and efficient transition, pledging continuity with his slain predecessor's policies.

For several days the nation was steeped in sorrow. Not until then did many Americans realize how fully their young, vibrant president and his captivating wife had cast a spell over them. Chopped down in his prime after only slightly more than a thousand days in the White House, Kennedy was acclaimed more for the ideals he had enunciated and the spirit he had kindled than for the concrete goals he had achieved. He had laid one myth to rest forever—that a Catholic could not be trusted with the presidency of the United States.

In later years revelations about Kennedy's womanizing and allegations about his involvement with organized crime figures tarnished his reputation. But despite those accusations, his apparent vigor, charisma, and idealism made him an inspirational figure for the generation of Americans who came of age in the 1960s—including Bill





Clinton, who as a boy had briefly met President Kennedy and would himself be elected president in 1992.



### The LBJ Brand on the Presidency

The torch passed to craggy-faced Lyndon Baines Johnson, a Texan who towered six feet three inches. The new president hailed from the populist hill country of west Texas, whose people had first sent him to Washington as a twenty-nine-year-old congressman in 1937. Franklin D. Roosevelt was his political “Daddy,” Johnson claimed, and he had supported New Deal measures down the

#### President Lyndon Baines Johnson (1908–1973)

Dedicated and hard-working, Johnson saw his presidency shattered by the trauma of Vietnam. By the end of his term, he was so unpopular that he could find nonheckling audiences only on military bases or navy ships.



line. But when LBJ lost a Senate race in 1941, he learned the sobering lesson that liberal political beliefs did not necessarily win elections in Texas. He trimmed his sails to the right and squeezed himself into a Senate seat in 1948 with a questionable eighty-seven-vote margin—hence the ironic nickname “Landslide Lyndon.”

Entrenched in the Senate, Johnson developed into a masterful wheeler-dealer. He became the Democratic majority leader in 1954, wielding power second only to that of Eisenhower in the White House. He could move mountains or checkmate opponents as the occasion demanded, using what came to be known as the “Johnson treatment”—a flashing display of backslapping, flesh-pressing, and arm-twisting that overbore friend and foe alike. His ego and vanity were legendary. On a visit to the Pope, Johnson was presented with a precious fourteenth-century painting from the Vatican art collection; in return, LBJ gave the Pope a bust—of LBJ!

As president, Johnson quickly shed the conservative coloration of his Senate years to reveal the latent liberal underneath. “No memorial oration or eulogy,” Johnson declared to Congress, “could more eloquently honor President Kennedy’s memory than the earliest possible passage of the Civil Rights Bill for which he fought so long.” After a lengthy conservative filibuster, Congress at last passed the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964. The act banned racial discrimination in most private facilities open to the public, including theaters, hospitals, and restaurants. It strengthened the federal government’s power to end segregation in schools and other public places. It created the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to eliminate discrimination in hiring. When conservatives tried to derail the legislation by adding a prohibition on sexual, as well as racial, discrimination, the tactic backfired. The bill’s opponents cynically calculated that liberals would not be able to support a bill that threatened to wipe out laws that singled out women for special protection because of their sex. But the act’s Title VII passed with the sexual clause intact. It soon proved to be a powerful instrument of federally enforced gender equality, as well as racial equality. Johnson struck another blow for women and minorities in 1965 when he issued an executive order requiring all federal contractors to take “affirmative action” against discrimination.

Johnson also rammed Kennedy’s stalled tax bill through Congress and added proposals of his own for a billion-dollar “War on Poverty.” Johnson voiced special concern for Appalachia, where the sickness of the soft-coal industry had left tens of thousands of mountain folk on the human slag heap.



Johnson dubbed his domestic program the “Great Society”—a sweeping set of New Dealish economic and welfare measures aimed at transforming the American way of life. Public support for LBJ’s antipoverty war was aroused by Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* (1962), which revealed that in affluent America 20 percent of the population—and over 40 percent of the black population—suffered in poverty.



### Johnson Battles Goldwater in 1964

Johnson’s nomination by the Democrats in 1964 was a foregone conclusion; he was chosen by acclamation in Atlantic City as his birthday present. Thanks to the tall Texan, the Democrats stood foursquare on their most liberal platform since Truman’s Fair Deal days. The Republicans, convening in San Francisco’s Cow Palace, nominated box-jawed Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, a bronzed and bespectacled champion of rock-ribbed conservatism. The American stage was thus set for a historic clash of political principles.

Goldwater’s forces had galloped out of the Southwest to ride roughshod over the moderate Republican “eastern establishment.” Insisting that the GOP offer “a choice not an echo,” Goldwater attacked the federal income tax, the Social Security system, the Tennessee Valley Authority, civil rights legislation, the nuclear test-ban treaty, and, most loudly, the Great Society. His fiercely dedicated followers proclaimed, “In Your Heart You Know He’s Right,” which prompted the Democratic response, “In Your Guts You Know He’s Nuts.” Goldwater warmed right-wing hearts when he announced that “extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And . . . moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.”

Democrats gleefully exploited the image of Goldwater as a trigger-happy cowboy who would “Barry us” in the debris of World War III. Johnson cultivated the contrasting image of a resolute statesman by seizing upon the Tonkin Gulf episode early in August 1964. Unbeknownst to the American public or Congress, U.S. Navy ships had been cooperating with South Vietnamese gunboats in provocative raids along the coast of North Vietnam. Two of these American destroyers were allegedly fired upon by the North Vietnamese on August 2 and 4, although exactly what happened still remains unclear. Later investigations strongly suggested that the North Vietnamese fired in self-defense on August 2 and that the “attack” of August 4 never happened. Johnson later reportedly wisecracked, “For all I know, the Navy was shooting at whales out there.”



**Negative Campaigning** This infamous “attack ad” was televised only once as a paid political advertisement, but it signaled the emergence of a newly noxious style of political campaigning. The ad showed a child dreamily pulling petals from a flower. Suddenly her voice gave way to that of a man reciting an ominous countdown, followed by the legend “Vote for President Johnson on November 3.” The implication was that Johnson’s Republican opponent, Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, was a trigger-happy cowboy whose election might bring nuclear Armageddon. Controversy forced the ad’s sponsors to take it off the air, but it was repeatedly re-shown in news coverage of the controversy itself—raising serious questions about the very definition of “news.”



Even more impressive were the Big Four legislative achievements that crowned LBJ's Great Society program: aid to education, medical care for the elderly and indigent, immigration reform, and a new voting rights bill.

Johnson neatly avoided the thorny question of separation of church and state by channeling educational aid to students, not schools, thus allowing funds to flow to hard-pressed parochial institutions. (Catholic John F. Kennedy had not dared to touch this prickly issue.) With a keen eye for the dramatic, LBJ signed the education bill in the humble one-room Texas schoolhouse he had attended as a boy.

Medicare for the elderly, accompanied by Medicaid for the poor, became a reality in 1965. Like the New Deal's Social Security program, Medicare and Medicaid created "entitlements." That is, they conferred rights on certain categories of Americans virtually in perpetuity, without the need for repeated congressional approval. These programs were part of a spreading "rights revolution" that materially improved the lives of millions of Americans—but also eventually undermined the federal government's financial health.

Immigration reform was the third of Johnson's Big Four feats. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 abolished at last the "national-origins" quota system that had been in place since 1921 (see p. 723). The act also doubled (to 290,000) the number of

immigrants allowed to enter annually, while for the first time setting limits on immigrants from the Western Hemisphere (120,000). The new law further provided for the admission of close relatives of United States citizens, outside those numerical limits. To the surprise of many of the act's architects, more than 100,000 persons per year took advantage of its "family unification" provisions in the decades after 1965, and the immigrant stream swelled beyond expectations. Even more surprising to the act's sponsors, the sources of immigration soon shifted heavily from Europe to Latin America and Asia, dramatically changing the racial and ethnic composition of the American population.

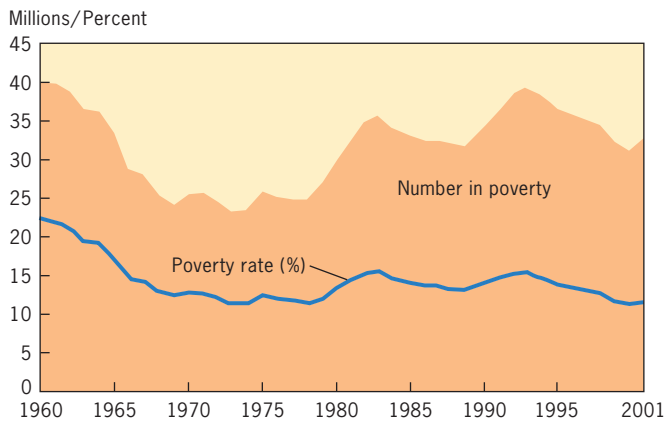
Great Society programs came in for rancorous political attack in later years. Conservatives charged that the billions spent for "social engineering" had simply been flushed down the waste pipe. Yet the poverty rate declined measurably in the ensuing decade. Medicare made especially dramatic reductions in the incidence of poverty among America's elderly. Other antipoverty programs, among them Project Head Start, sharply improved the educational performance of underprivileged youth. Infant mortality rates also fell in minority communities as general health conditions improved. Lyndon Johnson was not fully victorious in the war against poverty, but he did win several noteworthy battles.



#### **Giving Thanks for Medicare**

An elderly woman showed her gratitude to President Lyndon B. Johnson for his signing of the Medicare bill in April 1965, providing basic medical care for the aged. In tribute to former president Truman's unsuccessful effort to pass a national medical insurance program twenty years earlier, Johnson flew to Truman's Missouri home to sign the bill that he claimed would deliver "care for the sick and serenity for the fearful." No one acknowledged that Truman's earlier plan had been much more comprehensive or that Johnson, then a young Texas congressman, had opposed it.





### Poverty in the United States, 1960–2001

The poverty rate for 2001 (11.7 percent) increased slightly over 2000, when it hit its lowest point since 1979, at 11.3 percent. These figures refer to the number of people who live in families whose total income is lower than a set “poverty threshold,” which is tied to the consumer price index, so it varies with inflation. The “poverty rate” means the percentage of all Americans living below that threshold. (Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, and *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, 2003.)



### Battling for Black Rights

With the last of his Big Four reforms, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Johnson made heartening headway against one of the most persistent American evils, racial discrimination. In Johnson’s native South, the walls of segregation were crumbling, but not fast enough for long-suffering African Americans. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 gave the federal government more muscle to enforce school-desegregation orders and to prohibit racial discrimination in all kinds of public accommodations and employment. But the problem of voting rights remained. In Mississippi, which had the largest black minority of any state, only about 5 percent of eligible blacks were registered to vote. The lopsided pattern was similar throughout the South. Ballot-denying devices like the poll tax, literacy tests, and barefaced intimidation still barred black people from the political process. Mississippi law required the names of prospective black registrants to be published for two weeks in local newspapers—a device that virtually guaranteed economic reprisals, or worse.

Beginning in 1964, opening up the polling booths became the chief goal of the black movement in the South. The Twenty-fourth Amendment, ratified in January 1964, abolished the poll tax in federal elections. (See the Appendix.) Blacks joined hands with white civil rights workers—many of them student volunteers from the North—in a massive voter-registration drive in Mississippi during the “Freedom Summer” of 1964. Singing “We Shall Overcome,” they zealously set out to soothe generations of white anxieties and black fears.

But events soon blighted bright hopes. In late June 1964, one black and two white civil rights workers disappeared in Mississippi. Their badly beaten bodies were later found buried beneath an earthen dam. FBI investigators eventually arrested twenty-one white Mississippians, including the local sheriff, in connection with the killings. But white juries refused to convict the whites for these murders. In August an integrated “Mississippi Freedom Democratic party” delegation was denied its seat at the national Democratic convention. Only a handful of black Mississippians had succeeded in registering to vote.

Early in 1965 Martin Luther King, Jr., resumed the voter-registration campaign in Selma, Alabama, where blacks made up 50 percent of the population but only 1 percent of the voters. State troopers with tear gas and whips assaulted King’s demonstrators as they marched peacefully to the state capital at Montgomery. A Boston Unitarian minister was killed, and a few days later a white Detroit woman was shotgunned to death by Klansmen on the highway near Selma.

As the nation recoiled in horror before these violent scenes, President Johnson, speaking in soft southern accents, delivered a compelling address on television. What happened in Selma, he insisted, concerned all Americans, “who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice.” Then, in a stirring adaptation of the anthem of the civil rights movement, the president concluded, “And we shall overcome.” Following words with deeds, Johnson speedily shepherded through Congress the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965, signed into law on August 6. It outlawed literacy tests and sent federal voter registrars into several southern states.

The passage of the Voting Rights Act, exactly one hundred years after the conclusion of the Civil War, climaxed a century of awful abuse and robust resurgence for African Americans in the South. “Give us the ballot,” said Martin Luther King, Jr., “and the South will never be the same again.” He was right. The act did not end discrimination and oppression overnight, but it placed an awesome lever for change in blacks’ hands.

Black southerners now had power and began to wield it without fear of reprisals. White southerners began to court black votes and business as never before. In the following decade, for the first time since emancipation, African Americans began to migrate *into* the South.



### Black Power

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 marked the end of an era in the history of the civil rights movement—the era of nonviolent demonstrations, focused on the South, led by peaceful moderates like Martin Luther King, Jr., and aimed at integrating blacks into American society. As if to symbolize the turn of events, just five days after President Johnson signed the landmark voting law, a bloody riot erupted in Watts, a black ghetto in Los Angeles. Blacks enraged by police brutality burned and looted their own neighborhoods for nearly a week. When the smoke finally cleared over the Los Angeles basin, thirty-one blacks and three whites lay dead, more than a thousand people had been injured, and hundreds of buildings stood charred and gutted. The Watts explosion heralded a new phase of the black struggle—increasingly marked by militant confrontation, focusing on northern and western cities, led by radical and sometimes violent spokespersons, and often aiming not at interracial cooperation but at black separatism.

The pious Christian moderation of Martin Luther King, Jr., came under heavy fire from this second wave of younger black leaders, who privately mocked the dignified Dr. King as “de Lawd.” Deepening division among black leaders was highlighted by the career of Malcolm X. Born Malcolm Little, he was at first inspired by the militant black nationalists in the Nation of Islam. Like the Nation’s founder, Elijah Muhammed (born Elijah Poole), Malcolm changed his surname to advertise his lost African identity in white America. A brilliant and charismatic preacher, Malcolm X trumpeted black separatism and inveighed against the “blue-eyed white devils.” Eventually Malcolm distanced himself from Elijah Muhammed’s separatist preachings and moved toward mainstream Islam. (By the 1990s Islam was among America’s fastest-growing religions and counted some 2 million African American converts—or “reverts,” as Muslims described it—in its ranks.) In early 1965 he was cut down by rival Nation of Islam gunmen while speaking to a large crowd in New York City.

*Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968) and Malcolm X (1925–1965) not only differed in the goals they held out to their fellow African Americans—King urging racial integration and Malcolm X black separatism—but also in the means they advocated to achieve them. In his famous “I Have a Dream” speech during the interracial March on Washington on August 28, 1963, King proclaimed to a quarter of a million people assembled at the Lincoln Memorial,*

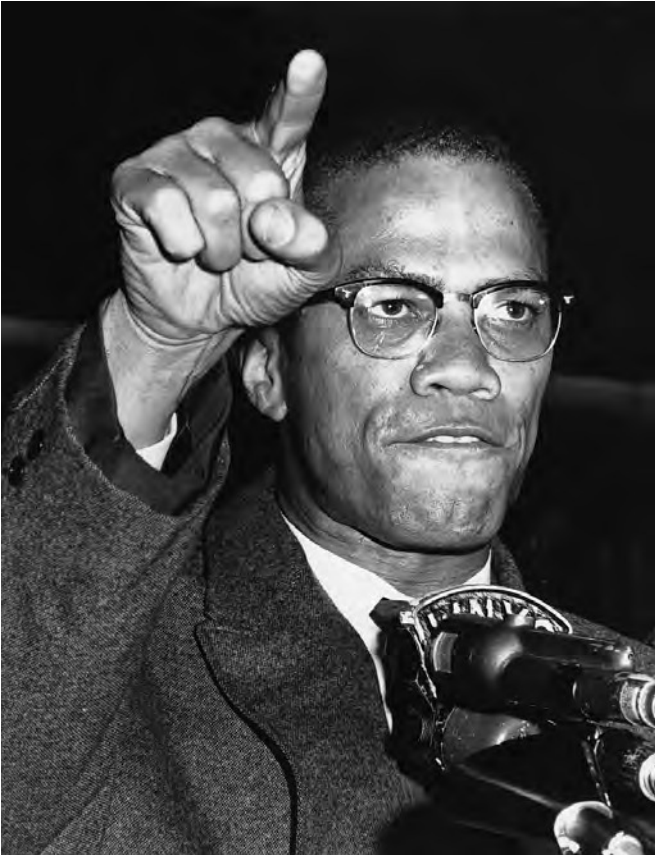
*“In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. . . . We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.”*

*About three months later, Malcolm X angrily rejected King’s “peaceful, turn-the-other-cheek revolution”:*

*“Revolution is bloody, revolution is hostile, revolution knows no compromise, revolution overturns and destroys everything that gets in its way. And you, sitting around here like a knot on the wall, saying, ‘I’m going to love these folks no matter how much they hate me,’ . . . Whoever heard of a revolution where they lock arms, . . . singing ‘We shall overcome?’ You don’t do that in a revolution. You don’t do any singing, you’re too busy swinging.”*

The Black Panther party meanwhile openly brandished weapons in the streets of Oakland, California. Then in 1966 Trinidad-born Stokely Carmichael, a leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced “snick”), began to preach the doctrine of “Black Power,” which, he said, “will smash everything Western civilization has created.” Some





**Malcolm X** The charismatic black leader was a hypnotizing speaker who could rivet and arouse crowds with his call for black separatism. At the end of his life, Malcolm began to temper his separatist creed.

advocates of Black Power insisted that they simply intended the slogan to describe a broad-front effort to exercise the political and economic rights gained by the civil rights movement and to speed the integration of American society. But other African Americans, recollecting previous black nationalist movements like that of Marcus Garvey earlier in the century (see p. 741), breathed a vibrant separatist meaning into the concept of Black Power. They emphasized African American distinctiveness, promoted “Afro” hairstyles and dress, shed their “white” names for new African identities, and demanded black studies programs in schools and universities.

Ironically, just as the civil rights movement had achieved its greatest legal and political triumphs, more city-shaking riots erupted in the black ghettos of several American cities. A bloody outburst in Newark, New Jersey, in the summer of 1967 took twenty-five lives.

Federal troops restored order in Detroit, Michigan, after forty-three people died in the streets. As in Los Angeles, black rioters torched their own neighborhoods, attacking police officers and even firefighters, who had to battle both flames and mobs howling, “Burn, baby, burn.”

These riotous outbursts angered many white Americans, who threatened to retaliate with their own “backlash” against ghetto arsonists and killers. Inner-city anarchy baffled many northerners, who had considered racial problems a purely “southern” question. But black concerns had moved north—as had nearly half the nation’s black people. In the North the Black Power movement now focused less on civil rights and more on economic demands. Black unemployment, for example, was nearly double that for whites. These oppressive new problems seemed even less likely to be solved peaceably than the struggle for voting rights in the South.

Despair deepened when the magnetic and moderate voice of Martin Luther King, Jr., was forever silenced by a sniper’s bullet in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 4, 1968. A martyr for justice, he had bled and died against

#### You Don’t Understand Boy—You’re Supposed to Just Shuffle Along



the peculiarly American thorn of race. The killing of King cruelly robbed the American people of one of the most inspirational leaders in their history—at a time when they could least afford to lose him. This outrage triggered a nationwide orgy of ghetto-gutting and violence that cost over forty lives.

Rioters noisily made news, but thousands of other blacks quietly made history. Their voter registration in the South shot upward, and by the late 1960s several hundred blacks held elected office in the Old South. Cleveland, Ohio, and Gary, Indiana, elected black mayors. By 1972 nearly half of southern black children sat in integrated classrooms. Actually, more schools in the South were integrated than in the North. About a third of black families had risen economically into the ranks of the middle class—though an equal proportion remained below the “poverty line.” King left a shining legacy of racial progress, but he was cut down when the job was far from completed.



### Combating Communism in Two Hemispheres

Violence at home eclipsed Johnson's legislative triumphs, while foreign flare-ups threatened his political life. Discontented Dominicans rose in revolt against their military government in April 1965. Johnson speedily announced that the Dominican Republic was the target

of a Castro-like coup by “Communist conspirators,” and he dispatched American troops, ultimately some twenty-five thousand, to restore order. But the evidence of a communist takeover was fragmentary at best. Johnson was widely condemned, at home and in Latin America, for his temporary reversion to the officially abandoned “gunboat diplomacy.”

At about the same time, Johnson was sinking deeper into the monsoon mud of Vietnam. Viet Cong guerrillas attacked an American air base at Pleiku, South Vietnam, in February 1965. The president immediately ordered retaliatory bombing raids against military installations in North Vietnam and for the first time ordered attacking U.S. troops to land. By the middle of March 1965, the Americans had “Operation Rolling Thunder” in full swing—regular full-scale bombing attacks against North Vietnam. Before 1965 ended, some 184,000 American troops were involved, most of them slogging through the jungles and rice paddies of South Vietnam searching for guerrillas.

Johnson had now taken the first fateful steps down a slippery path. He and his advisers believed that a fine-tuned, step-by-step “escalation” of American force would drive the enemy to defeat with a minimum loss of life on both sides. But the enemy matched every increase in American firepower with more men and more wiliness in the art of guerrilla warfare.

The South Vietnamese themselves were meanwhile becoming spectators in their own war, as the fighting became increasingly Americanized. Corrupt



#### The Mechanized War

High technology and modern equipment, such as this helicopter, gave the Americans in Vietnam a huge military advantage. But unaccompanied by a clear political purpose and a national will to win, technological superiority was insufficient to achieve final victory.



and collapsible governments succeeded each other in Saigon with bewildering rapidity. Yet American officials continued to talk of defending a faithful democratic ally. Washington spokespeople also defended America's action as a test of Uncle Sam's "commitment" and of the reliability of his numerous treaty pledges to resist communist encroachment. Persuaded by such panicky thinking, Johnson steadily raised the military stakes in Vietnam. By 1968 he had poured more than half a million troops into Southeast Asia, and the annual bill for the war was exceeding \$30 billion. Yet the end was nowhere in sight.



### Vietnam Vexations

America could not defeat the enemy in Vietnam, but it seemed to be defeating itself. World opinion grew increasingly hostile; the blasting of an underdeveloped country by a mighty superpower struck many critics as obscene. Several nations expelled American Peace Corps volunteers. Haughty Charles de Gaulle, ever suspicious of American intentions, ordered NATO off French soil in 1966.

Overcommitment in Southeast Asia also tied America's hands elsewhere. Beleaguered Israel stunned the Soviet-backed Egyptians in the devastating Six-Day War in June 1967. When the smoke cleared, Israel occupied new territories in the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank of the Jordan River,

including Jerusalem (see the map on p. 972). The Israeli victory brought some 1 million resentful Palestinian Arabs under direct Israeli control, while another 350,000 Palestinian refugees fled to neighboring Jordan. Although the Israelis eventually withdrew from the Sinai, they refused to relinquish the other areas and began moving Jewish settlers into the heavily Arab district of the West Bank. The Six-Day War markedly intensified the problems of the already volatile Middle East, compressing and focusing the Arab-Israeli conflict into an intractable standoff between the Israelis and Palestinians, now led by Yasir Arafat (1929–2004), head of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The Middle East became an ever more dangerously packed powder keg that the war-plagued United States proved powerless to defuse.

Domestic discontent festered as the Vietnamese entanglement dragged on. Antiwar demonstrations had begun on a small scale with campus "teach-ins" in 1965, and gradually these protests mounted to tidal-wave proportions. As the long arm of the military draft dragged more and more young men off to the Southeast Asian slaughter pen, resistance stiffened. Thousands of draft registrants fled to Canada; others publicly burned their draft cards. Hundreds of thousands of marchers filled the streets of New York, San Francisco, and other cities, chanting, "Hell no, we won't go" and "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?" Many Americans felt pangs of conscience at the spectacle of their countrymen burning peasant huts and blistering civilians with ghastrly napalm.



#### Antiwar Demonstration in California

Public opinion gradually but inexorably turned against the war. In 1965 polls showed that only 15 percent of Americans favored withdrawal from Vietnam. But by 1969, 69 percent of those interviewed indicated that they considered the war a "mistake," and by 1970 a majority supported withdrawal of U.S. troops.



Opposition in Congress to the Vietnam involvement centered in the influential Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, headed by Senator William Fulbright of Arkansas. A constant thorn in the side of the president, he staged a series of widely viewed televised hearings in 1966 and 1967, during which prominent personages aired their views, largely antiwar. Gradually the public came to feel that it had been deceived about the causes and “winnability” of the war. A yawning “credibility gap” opened between the government and the people. New flocks of antiwar “doves” were hatching daily.

Even within the administration, doubts were deepening about the wisdom of the war in Vietnam. When Defense Secretary McNamara expressed increasing discomfiture at the course of events, he was quietly eased out of the cabinet. (Years later McNamara wrote that “we were wrong, terribly wrong,” about Vietnam.) By early 1968 the brutal and futile struggle had become the longest and most unpopular foreign war in the nation’s history. The government had failed utterly to explain to the people what was supposed to be at stake in Vietnam. Many critics wondered if any objective could be worth the vast price, in blood and treasure, that America was paying. Casualties, killed and wounded, already exceeded 100,000. More bombs had been dropped on Vietnam than on all enemy territory in World War II.

The war was also ripping apart the fabric of American society and even threatening to shred the Constitution. In

**The Vietnam Quagmire** This soldier, carrying a rocket launcher across a stream in the ironically named “demilitarized zone” (DMZ) that separated North and South Vietnam, was killed in action just days after this photo was taken.



1967 President Johnson ordered the CIA, in clear violation of its charter as a *foreign* intelligence agency, to spy on domestic antiwar activists. He also encouraged the FBI to turn its counterintelligence program, code-named “Cointelpro,” against the peace movement. “Cointelpro” subverted leading “doves” with false accusations that they were communist sympathizers. These clandestine tactics made the FBI look like a totalitarian state’s secret police rather than a guardian of American democracy.

As the war dragged on, evidence mounted that America had been entrapped in an Asian civil war, fighting against highly motivated rebels who were striving to overthrow an oppressive regime. Yet Johnson clung to his basic strategy of ratcheting up the pressure bit by bit. He stubbornly assured doubting Americans that he could see “the light at the end of the tunnel.” But to growing numbers of Americans, it seemed that Johnson was bent on “saving” Vietnam by destroying it.

### **Vietnam Topples Johnson**

Hawkish illusions that the struggle was about to be won were shattered by a blistering communist offensive launched in late January 1968, during Tet, the Vietnamese New Year. At a time when the Viet Cong were supposedly licking their wounds, they suddenly and simultaneously mounted savage attacks on twenty-seven key South Vietnamese cities, including the capital, Saigon. Although eventually beaten off with heavy losses, they demonstrated anew that victory could not be gained by Johnson’s strategy of gradual escalation. The Tet offensive ended in a military defeat but a political victory for the Viet Cong. With an increasingly insistent voice, American public opinion demanded a speedy end to the war. Opposition grew so vehement that President Johnson could feel the very foundations of government shaking under his feet. He was also suffering through hells of personal agony over American casualties. He wept as he signed letters of condolence and slipped off at night to pray with monks at a small Catholic church in Washington.

American military leaders responded to the Tet attacks with a request for 200,000 more troops. The size of the request staggered many policymakers. Former secretary of state Dean Acheson reportedly advised the president that “the Joint Chiefs of Staff don’t know what they’re talking about.”

The president meanwhile was being sharply challenged from within his own party. Eugene McCarthy, a little-known Democratic senator from Minnesota, had



**President Lyndon Johnson Haunted by Specters of Vietnam, 1967**

emerged as a contender for the 1968 Democratic presidential nomination. The soft-spoken McCarthy, a sometime poet and devout Catholic, gathered a small army of antiwar college students as campaign workers. Going “clean for Gene,” with shaven faces and shortened locks, they helped him gain an impressive 42 percent of the Democratic vote in the New Hampshire presidential primary on March 12, 1968. Four days later Senator Robert F. Kennedy of New York, the murdered president’s younger brother and by now himself a “dove” on Vietnam, threw his hat into the ring. The charismatic Kennedy, heir to his fallen brother’s mantle of leadership, stirred a passionate response among workers, African Americans, Latinos, and young people.

These startling events abroad and at home were not lost on LBJ. In a bombshell address on March 31, 1968, he announced on nationwide television that he would freeze American troop levels and scale back the bombing. Then, in a dramatic plea to unify a dangerously divided nation, Johnson startled his vast audience by firmly declaring that he would not be a candidate for the presidency in 1968.

Johnson’s “abdication” had the effect of preserving the military status quo. He had held the “hawks” in check, while offering himself as a sacrifice to the militant



**Robert F. Kennedy Campaigning for the Presidency, 1968** Wrapped in the Kennedy family mystique and exuding his own boyish charm, Kennedy excited partisan crowds to wildly adulatory outpourings.

“doves.” The United States could thus maintain the maximum *acceptable* level of military activity in Vietnam with one hand, while trying to negotiate a settlement with the other. North Vietnam shortly agreed to commence negotiations in Paris. But progress was glacially slow, as prolonged bickering developed over the very shape of the conference table.



### The Presidential Sweepstakes of 1968

The summer of 1968 was one of the hottest political seasons in the nation’s history. Johnson’s heir apparent for the Democratic nomination was his liberal vice president, Hubert H. Humphrey, a former pharmacist, college professor, mayor, and U.S. senator from Minnesota. Senators McCarthy and Kennedy meanwhile



dueled in several state primaries, with Kennedy's bandwagon gathering ever-increasing speed. But on June 5, 1968, the night of an exciting victory in the California primary, Kennedy was shot to death by a young Arab immigrant resentful of the candidate's pro-Israel views.

Angry antiwar zealots, deprived by an assassin's bullet of their leading candidate, streamed menacingly into Chicago for the Democratic convention in August 1968. Mayor Richard Daley responded by arranging for barbed-wire barricades around the convention hall ("Fort Daley"), as well as thousands of police and National Guard reinforcements. Some militant demonstrators baited the officers in blue by calling them "pigs," chanting "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh," shouting obscenities, and hurling bags and cans of excrement at the police lines. As people the world over watched on television, the exasperated "peace officers" broke into a "police riot," clubbing and manhandling innocent and guilty alike. Acrid tear gas fumes hung heavy over the city even as Humphrey steam-rolled to the nomination on the first ballot.

The Humphrey forces blocked the McCarthyites' attempt to secure an antiwar platform plank and hammered into place their own declaration that armed force would be relentlessly applied until the enemy showed more willingness to negotiate.

Scenting victory over the badly divided Democrats, the Republicans convened in plush Miami Beach, Florida, where former vice president Richard M. Nixon arose from his political grave to win the nomination. As a "hawk" on Vietnam and a right-leaning middle-of-the-roader on domestic policy, Nixon pleased the Goldwater conservatives and was acceptable to party moderates. He appealed to white southern voters and to the "law and order" element when he tapped as his vice-presidential running mate Maryland's Governor Spiro T. Agnew, noted for his tough stands against dissidents and black militants. The Republican platform called for victory in Vietnam and a strong anticrime policy.

Adding color and confusion to the campaign was a "spoiler" third-party ticket—the American Independent party—headed by a scrappy ex-pugilist, George C. Wallace, former governor of Alabama. In 1963 he had stood in the doorway to prevent two black students from entering the University of Alabama. "Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!" he shouted. Wallace jabbed repeatedly at "pointy-headed bureaucrats," and he taunted hecklers as "bums" in need of a bath. Speaking behind a bulletproof screen, he called for prodding the blacks into their place, with bayonets if necessary. He and his running mate, former air force general Curtis LeMay, also proposed smashing the



**The Siege of Chicago, 1968** Antiwar protesters surrounded a monument to Civil War general John Logan during a week of demonstrations outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in August 1968. Confrontations with the Chicago police and National Guardsmen led to many injuries and the arrest of seven hundred people, and helped tarnish Democratic candidate Vice President Hubert Humphrey with responsibility for Lyndon Johnson's unpopular war. His Republican opponent, Richard Nixon, won the presidency with calls for "honorable peace" in Vietnam and "law and order" at home.

North Vietnamese to smithereens by "bombing them back to the Stone Age."

Between the positions of the Republicans and the Democrats on Vietnam, there was little choice. Both candidates were committed to carrying on the war until the enemy settled for an "honorable peace," which

seemed to mean an “American victory.” The millions of “doves” had no place to roost, and many refused to vote at all. Humphrey, scorched by the LBJ brand, went down to defeat as a loyal prisoner of his chief’s policies.

Nixon, who had lost a cliffhanger to Kennedy in 1960, won one in 1968. He garnered 301 electoral votes, with 43.4 percent of the popular tally (31,785,480), as compared with 191 electoral votes and 42.7 percent of the popular votes (31,275,166) for Humphrey. Nixon was the first president-elect since 1848 not to bring in on his coattails at least one house of Congress for his party in an initial presidential election. He carried not a single major city, thus attesting to the continuing urban strength of the Democrats, who also won about 95 percent of the black vote. Nixon had received no clear mandate to do anything. He was a minority president who owed his election to divisions over the war and protest against the unfair draft, crime, and rioting.

As for Wallace, he won an impressive 9,906,473 popular votes and 46 electoral votes, all from five states of the Deep South, four of which the Republican Goldwater had carried in 1964. Wallace remained a formidable force, for he had amassed the largest third-party popular vote in American history. Wallace had also resoundingly demonstrated the continuing power of “populist” politics, which appealed to voters’ fears and resentments rather than to the better angels of their nature. His candidacy foreshadowed a coarsening of American political life that would take deep root in the ensuing decades.

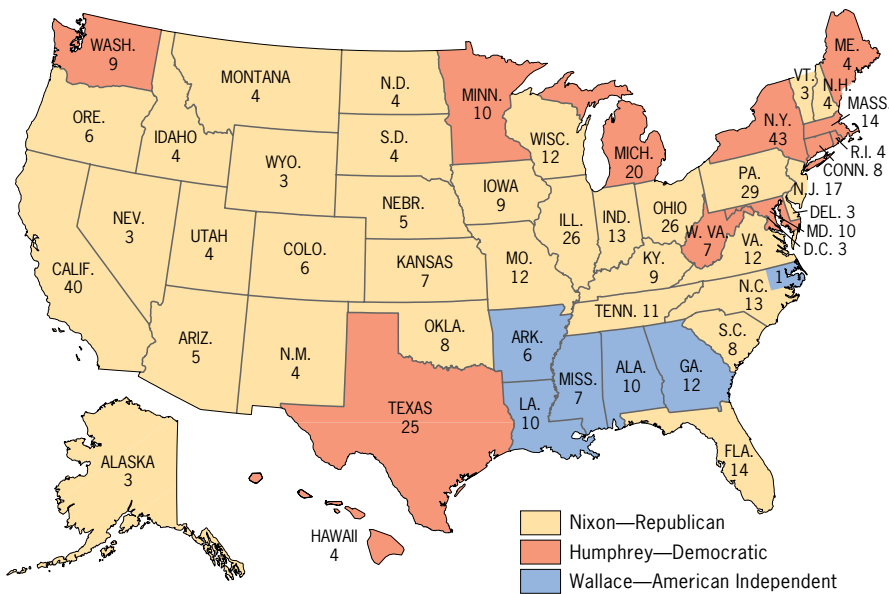


### The Obituary of Lyndon Johnson

Talented but tragedy-struck Lyndon Johnson returned to his Texas ranch in January 1969 and died there four years later. His party was defeated, and his “me-too” Hubert Humphrey was repudiated. Yet Johnson’s legislative leadership for a time had been remarkable. No president since Lincoln had worked harder or done more for civil rights. None had shown more compassion for the poor, blacks, and the ill-educated.

But by 1966 Johnson was already sinking into the Vietnam quicksands. Great Society programs began to wither on the vine, as soaring war costs sucked tax dollars into the military machine. His effort to provide both guns and butter prevented him from delivering either in sufficient quantity. Ever-creeping inflation blighted the prospects of prosperity, and the War on Poverty met resistance that was as stubborn as the Viet Cong and eventually went down to defeat. Great want persisted alongside great wealth.

Johnson had crucified himself on the cross of Vietnam. The Southeast Asian quagmire engulfed his noblest intentions. Committed to some degree by his two predecessors, he had chosen to defend the American foothold and enlarge the conflict rather than be run out. He was evidently persuaded by his brightest advisers, both civilian and military, that massive aerial bombing and limited troop commitments would make a “cheap”



**Presidential Election of 1968 (with electoral vote by state)** George Wallace won in five states, and he denied a clear majority to either of the two major-party candidates in twenty-five other states. A shift of some fifty thousand votes might well have thrown the election into the House of Representatives, giving Wallace the strategic bargaining position he sought.

victory possible. His decision not to escalate the fighting further offended the “hawks,” and his refusal to back off altogether antagonized the “doves.” Like the Calvinists of colonial days, luckless Lyndon Johnson was damned if he did and damned if he did not.



### The Cultural Upheaval of the 1960s

The struggles of the 1960s against racism, poverty, and the war in Vietnam had momentous cultural consequences. The decade came to be seen as a watershed dividing two distinct eras in terms of values, morals, and behavior.

Everywhere in 1960s America, a newly negative attitude toward all kinds of authority took hold. Disillusioned by the discovery that American society was not free of racism, sexism, imperialism, and oppression, many young people lost their traditional moral rudders. Neither families nor churches nor schools seemed to be able to define values and shape behavior with the certainty of shared purpose that many people believed had once existed. The nation’s mainline Protestant denominations, which had dominated American religious life for centuries, lost their grip in the 1960s, as weekly churchgoing declined from 48 percent in the late 1950s to 41 percent in the early 1970s. The liberal Protestant churches suffered the

most. They increasingly ceded religious authority to conservative evangelicals while surrendering cultural authority to secular professionals and academic social scientists. A new cultural divide began to take shape, as educated Americans became increasingly secular and the less educated became more religious. Religious upheaval even churned the tradition-bound Roman Catholic Church, among the world’s oldest and most conservative institutions. Clerics abandoned their Roman collars and Latin lingo, folk songs replaced Gregorian chants, and meatless Fridays became ancient history. No matter what the topic, conventional wisdom and inherited ideas came under fire. “Trust no one over thirty” was a popular sneer of rebellious youth.

Skepticism about authority had deep historical roots in American culture, and it had even bloomed in the supposedly complacent and conformist 1950s. “Beat” poets like Allen Ginsberg and iconoclastic novelists like Jack Kerouac had voiced dark disillusion with the materialistic pursuits and “establishment” arrogance of the Eisenhower era. In movies like *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), the attractive young actor James Dean expressed the restless frustration of many young people.

The disaffection of the young reached crisis proportions in the tumultuous 1960s. One of the first organized protests against established authority broke out at the University of California at Berkeley in 1964, in the aptly named Free Speech Movement. Students objected to



**The Free Speech Movement, Berkeley, California, December 4, 1964** Student leader Mario Savio addresses a crowd at the University of California at Berkeley. Schooled in the civil rights movement, Savio declared, “We want freedom for all Americans, not just Negroes.” The Free Speech Movement marked the first of the large-scale student mobilizations that rocked campuses across the country throughout the rest of the 1960s.





**The Counterculture** Psychedelic buses carried hippies, seeking escape from conventional American living, to experimental communes and musical “happenings.” Author Tom Wolfe inspired young people to hit the road with his chronicle of a wild bus tour in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*.

an administrative ban on the use of campus space for political debate. During months of protest, they accused the Cold War “megaversity” of promoting corporate interests rather than humane values. But in only a few years, the clean-cut Berkeley activists and their sober-minded sit-ins would seem downright quaint. Fired by outrage against the war in Vietnam, some sons and daughters of the middle class became radical political rebels. Others turned to mind-bending drugs, tuned in to “acid rock,” and dropped out of “straight” society. Still others “did their own thing” in communes or “alternative” institutions. Patriotism became a dirty word. Beflowered women in trousers and long-haired men with earrings heralded the rise of a self-conscious “counterculture” stridently opposed to traditional American ways.

The 1960s also witnessed a “sexual revolution,” though its novelty and scale are often exaggerated. Without doubt, the introduction of the birth-control pill in 1960 made unwanted pregnancies much easier to avoid and sexual appetites easier to satisfy. The Mattachine Society, founded in Los Angeles in 1951, was a pioneering advocate for gay rights, as gay men and lesbians

*The alternative newspaper The Village Voice captured the momentousness of one aspect of the sexual revolution on the first anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion in June 1969, the day when homosexuals had fought back against a police attack and thereby launched a new gay and lesbian liberation movement:*

“They stretched in a line, from Gimbels to Times Square, thousands and thousands and thousands, chanting, waving, screaming—the outrageous and the outraged, splendid in their flaming colors, splendid in their delirious up-front birthday celebration of liberation. . . . No one could quite believe it, eyes rolled back in heads, Sunday tourists traded incredulous looks, wondrous faces poked out of air-conditioned cars. My God, are those really homosexuals? Marching? Up Sixth Avenue?”



**The First Gay Pride Parade, New York City, 1970** On the first anniversary of homosexuals' celebrated resistance to police harassment at the Stonewall Inn, on June 27, 1969, two hundred men and women marched from Greenwich Village to Central Park, initiating a tradition that now attracts thousands of paraders and onlookers, including prominent politicians.

increasingly demanded sexual tolerance. A brutal attack on gay men by off-duty police officers at New York's Stonewall Inn in 1969 powerfully energized gay and lesbian militancy. Widening worries in the 1980s about sexually transmitted diseases like genital herpes and AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) finally slowed, but did not reverse, the sexual revolution.

Launched in youthful idealism, many of the cultural "revolutions" of the 1960s sputtered out in violence and cynicism. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), once at the forefront of the antipoverty and antiwar campaigns, had by decade's end spawned an underground terrorist group called the Weathermen. Peaceful civil rights demonstrations had given way to blockbusting urban riots. What started as apparently innocent experiments with drugs like marijuana and LSD had fried many youthful brains and spawned a loathsome underworld of drug lords and addicts.

Straight-laced guardians of respectability denounced the self-indulgent romanticism of the "flower children" as the beginning of the end of modern civilization. Sympathetic observers hailed the "greening" of America—the replacement of materialism and imperialism by a new consciousness of human values. The upheavals of the 1960s could be largely attributed to three P's: the youthful population bulge, protest against racism and the Vietnam War, and the apparent permanence of prosperity. As the decade flowed into the 1970s, the flower children grew older and had children of their own, the civil rights movement fell silent, the war ended, and economic stagnation blighted the bloom of prosperity. Young people in the 1970s seemed more concerned with finding a job in the system than with tearing the system down. But if the "counterculture" had not managed fully to replace older values, it had weakened their grip, perhaps permanently.

## Chronology

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| <p><b>1961</b> Berlin crisis and construction of Berlin Wall<br/>Alliance for Progress<br/>Bay of Pigs<br/>Kennedy sends “military advisers” to South Vietnam</p>          | <p><b>1964</b> Johnson defeats Goldwater for presidency<br/>War on Poverty begins<br/>Civil Rights Act</p>  |
| <p><b>1962</b> Pressure from Kennedy results in rollback of steel prices<br/>Trade Expansion Act<br/>Laos neutralized<br/>Cuban missile crisis</p>                         | <p><b>1965</b> Great Society legislation<br/>Voting Rights Act<br/>U.S. troops occupy Dominican Republic</p>  |
| <p><b>1963</b> Anti-Diem coup in South Vietnam<br/>Civil rights march in Washington, D.C.<br/>Kennedy assassinated; Johnson assumes presidency</p>                         | <p><b>1965-</b> Race riots in U.S. cities<br/><b>1968</b> Escalation of Vietnam War</p>   |
| <p><b>1964</b> Twenty-fourth Amendment (abolishing poll tax in federal elections) ratified<br/>“Freedom Summer” voter registration in South<br/>Tonkin Gulf Resolution</p> | <p><b>1967</b> Six-Day War between Israel and Egypt<br/><b>1968</b> Tet offensive in Vietnam<br/>Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy assassinated<br/>Nixon defeats Humphrey and Wallace for presidency</p> |
|  | <p><b>1969</b> Stonewall Inn riot in New York City<br/>Astronauts land on moon</p>  |

## VARYING VIEWPOINTS

### The Sixties: Constructive or Destructive?

The 1960s were convulsed by controversy, and they have remained controversial ever since. Conflicts raged in that turbulent decade between social classes, races, sexes, and generations. More than three decades later, the shock waves from the 1960s still reverberate through American society. The “Contract with America” that swept conservative Republicans to power in 1994 amounted to nothing less than a wholesale repudiation of the government activism that marked the sixties decade and a resounding reaffirmation of the “traditional values” that sixties culture supposedly trashed. Liberal Democrats, on the other hand, continue to press affirmative action for women and minorities, protection for the environment, an expanded welfare state, and sexual tolerance—all legacies of the stormy sixties.

Four issues dominate historical discussion of the 1960s: the struggle for civil rights, the Great Society’s “War on Poverty,” the Vietnam War and the antiwar movement, and the emergence of the “counterculture.”

Although most scholars praise the civil rights achievements of the 1960s, they disagree over the civil rights movement’s turn away from nonviolence and its embrace of separatism and Black Power. The Freedom Riders and Martin Luther King, Jr., find much more approval in most history books than do Malcolm X and the Black Panther party. But some scholars, notably William L. Van Deburg in *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965–1975* (1992), argue that the “flank effect” of radical Black Power advocates like Stokely Carmichael actually enhanced the bargaining posi-



tion of moderates like Dr. King. Deburg also suggests that the enthusiasm of Black Power advocates for African American cultural uniqueness reshaped both black self-consciousness and the broader culture, as it provided a model for the feminist and multiculturalist movements of the 1970s and later.

Johnson's War on Poverty has found its liberal defenders in scholars like Allen Matusow (*The Unraveling of America*, 1984) and John Schwarz (*America's Hidden Success*, 1988). Schwarz demonstrates, for example, that Medicare and Social Security reforms virtually eliminated poverty among America's elderly. But the Great Society has also provoked strong criticism from writers such as Charles Murray (*Losing Ground*, 1984) and Lawrence Meade (*Beyond Entitlements*, 1986). As those conservative critics see the poverty issue, to use a phrase popular in the 1960s, the Great Society was part of the problem, not part of the solution. In their view the War on Poverty did not simply fail to eradicate poverty among the so-called underclass; it actually deepened the dependency of the poor on the welfare state and even generated a multigenerational "cycle" of poverty. In this argument Johnson's Great Society stands indicted of creating, in effect, a permanent welfare class.

For many young people of the 1960s, the antiwar movement protesting America's policy in Vietnam provided their initiation into politics and their introduction to "movement culture," with its sense of community and shared purpose. But scholars dis-

agree over the movement's real effectiveness in checking the war. Writers like John Lewis Gaddis (*Strategies of Containment*, 1982) explain America's eventual withdrawal from Vietnam essentially without reference to the protesters in the streets. Others, like Todd Gitlin (*The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, 1987), insist that mass protest was the force that finally pressed the war to a conclusion.

Debate over the counterculture not only pits liberals against conservatives but also pits liberals against radicals. A liberal historian like William O'Neill (*Coming Apart*, 1971) might sympathize with what he considers some of the worthy values pushed by student activists, such as racial justice, nonviolence, and the antiwar movement, but he also claims that much of the sixties "youth culture" degenerated into hedonism, arrogance, and social polarization. In contrast, younger historians such as Michael Kazin and Maurice Isserman argue that cultural radicalism and political radicalism were two sides of the same coin. Many young people in the sixties made little distinction between the personal and the political. As Sara Evans demonstrates in *Personal Politics* (1980), "the personal *was* the political" for many women. She finds the roots of modern feminism in the sexism women activists encountered in the civil rights and antiwar movements.

While critics may argue over the "good" versus the "bad" sixties, there is no denying the degree to which that tumultuous time, for better or worse, shaped the world in which we now live.