

# The Sixties

by Harvard Sitkoff



*Photograph of a female demonstrator offering a flower to a military police officer, October 21, 1967. (National Archives and Records Administration)*

**F**orty years after it ended, the 1960s remains the most consequential and controversial decade of the twentieth century. It would dawn bright with hope and idealism, see the liberal state attain its mightiest reforms and reach, and end in discord and disillusionment. Many would remember it nostalgically, and perhaps many more would describe it as an era of irresponsible excess.

The decade began symbolically on February 1, 1960, when four African American students at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College in Greensboro sat down at the lunch counter at the local Woolworth's and sought to order coffee and doughnuts. Their courageous determination—at a time when the great majority of African Americans lived in segregated communities and attended segregated schools on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line, and none attended the all-white state universities of the South—sparked a new, more militant, direct action phase of the Civil Rights Movement. By September 1961, nearly seventy thousand students had engaged in sit-ins to desegregate restaurants, churches, libraries, and movie theaters. Meanwhile, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) began organizing “freedom rides” through the South to dramatize the widespread violation of a 1960 Supreme Court ruling banning segregation in interstate transportation. The vicious assaults upon the freedom riders, in the bright glare of television coverage, then brought yet more African Americans into the freedom struggle.

In the spring of 1963, Martin Luther King Jr.—determined to expose the violent extremism of white racism and to force President John F. Kennedy to push for strong civil rights legislation—organized a series of marches and sit-ins in Birmingham, Alabama. They

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succeeded in provoking police commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor to resort to brutal force. The televised scenes of high-pressure water hoses and snarling police dogs being used against nonviolent demonstrators, many of them children, filled many Americans with revulsion. Kennedy responded by proposing a comprehensive civil rights bill. To push Congress to pass the measure, nearly 250,000 Americans converged on the Capitol late in August. There they heard King proclaim his dream of freedom and justice and brotherhood. But not even one of the greatest speeches in history moved Congress to act.

It would take the assassination in Texas of the popular President Kennedy in November 1963, and the desire of his Texan successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, to prove himself to liberals, to produce the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The most far-reaching civil rights legislation in US history, it banned racial discrimination and segregation in most public accommodations, in employment, and in federally funded programs. Civil rights leaders then focused on gaining a voting rights act. Once again, violent attacks upon black protesters, in March 1965, precipitated legislative action. This time state troopers attacked marchers in Selma, Alabama, where only 335 of the 15,000 eligible black voters were registered to vote. The President then proposed, and Congress passed, the Voting Rights Act, which was signed into law in August. It eliminated many barriers to registration—such as literacy tests—used to restrict voting by blacks, dramatically increasing the number of African American registered voters and black political clout.

The Civil Rights Movement significantly altered, but did not revolutionize, race relations. Discrimination lingered in many spheres and African American unemployment and poverty remained disproportionately high. The many maladies of the black ghetto remained untouched. There, unfulfilled expectations and frustrated hopes exploded into the urban rioting of four long, hot summers, helping to trigger a white backlash that undermined support for the liberal agenda. Yet, the decisions of black women and men to reject the submissive roles white men had assigned them legitimized the aspirations of other victims of oppression. They provided the blueprint for the liberation of other oppressed groups in the United States. They stimulated Hispanic Americans and Native Americans, gays, and women, to take to the streets to demand equal rights, and to emphasize group identity and pride.

Women, who commonly received less pay than men for comparable work, looked to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to redress their grievances. When the administration failed to do so, a group of women active in governmental affairs formed the National Organization for Women in 1966 to lobby for equal pay for equal work and to eliminate gender-based job discrimination. Younger female activists, many involved in the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War protests, created a women’s liberation movement. It aimed to transform women’s perceptions of themselves as merely wives and mothers, to gain the right of

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women to control their own sexuality and have access to safe, legal abortions, and to end the negative portrayals of women in the media, in advertising, and in language.

Meanwhile, the Civil Rights Movement had also helped redefine liberalism. By the mid-1960s, liberals were placing far greater emphasis than ever before on equalizing opportunity and targeting benefits to those who had previously been ignored. President Johnson declared “unconditional war on poverty,” and Congress responded with a variety of public works and educational programs to give the poor a “hand up, not a handout.” Following his landslide victory over Republican Barry Goldwater in 1964, Johnson succeeded in getting Congress to enact his Great Society legislation, including Medicare and Medicaid, a new immigration law that abolished the national-origins quotas of the 1920s, measures to protect the environment, funds for public housing and urban renewal, and creation of the National Endowment for the Arts and the Humanities. The poor—22 percent of the population in 1960—shrank to 13 percent in 1969.

But liberal rhetoric outdistanced results, and by 1966 the Johnson administration was spending twenty times more to wage war in Vietnam than to fight poverty in the United States. Nevertheless, the funds and attention given African Americans alienated many middle- and working-class whites, and that, as well as the race riots beginning in 1964, the student protest movement and counterculture, and the seemingly endless war in Vietnam without victory in sight, led to Republicans gaining forty-seven seats in the House of Representatives in the 1966 elections, sealing liberalism’s fate.

The Vietnam War had among its various causes: to stop the spread of Communism from North Vietnam into South Vietnam, and then, according to the “domino theory,” to the rest of southeast Asia; to show the People’s Republic of China that the United States was not a “paper tiger”; and to prove to the American voters that the Democrats were not soft on Communism. Kennedy inherited it from President Dwight Eisenhower and then increased American troops from a few hundred to more than sixteen thousand by late 1963; and Johnson inherited it from Kennedy and then escalated the conflict into a major war. To try to force its enemy to the negotiating table, the United States would drop on North Vietnam, between 1965 and 1968, more than three times the tonnage of bombs used by all combatants in World War II, and would increase the number of American troops engaged in the war to 184,000 by the end of 1965; 385,000 in 1966; 485,000 in 1967; and 543,000 in 1968. All to no avail. Each escalation by the United States was countered by one from North Vietnam, which calculated that it could gain more by outlasting the United States than by negotiating. Despite the Johnson administration’s claims of seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, it sank deeper into the quagmire, polarizing a divided country, fragmenting the Democratic Party, and feeding a tumultuous student movement.

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At the end of January 1968, the North Vietnamese and Vietcong (South Vietnamese Communists) launched the Tet Offensive, a massive military strike against American bases throughout South Vietnam. Although US troops repulsed the offensive after a month of ferocious fighting, the media emphasized horrific images of the war, the staggering number of American casualties, and the daring scope of the enemy offensive, causing many in the United States to question their nation's purposes and actions, and whether the war could be won at all. A shaken President Johnson then announced that he was halting the bombing of North Vietnam to facilitate peace talks to end the war, and that he would not accept the nomination of the Democratic Party to run for another term as president. An era of hope and liberalism lay in ruins.

By 1960, more than half the US population was under age thirty. Most were not radical, not even liberal, and many who were politically active were conservatives—idolizing Barry Goldwater, supporting the war in Vietnam, and embracing traditional values. But it was the minority of liberal arts majors and graduate students at prestigious universities who attracted the most attention.

Radicalized by what they saw as the impersonality and rigidity of campus administrators, the insensitivity of the nation's bureaucratic processes, and mainstream liberalism's failure to achieve radical change or end the war in Vietnam, an increasing number of students demonstrated to change university rules and protested against racism and war. They succeeded in largely abolishing dress codes and curfews, ending mandatory ROTC, and mobilizing campuses into an antiwar force that the government could not ignore.

Even more students, alienated and hungry for change, turned to cultural rebellion. Loosely associated with what was known as the "counterculture," some accepted the invitation to "turn on, tune in, and drop out," using mind-altering drugs, especially LSD. Many more tried marijuana. They showed disdain for middle-class consumerism by wearing surplus military clothing and torn jeans, and young men galled adults by sporting long hair and shaggy beards. Given the increasing acceptance of contraceptives and abortion, and the waning fears of unwanted pregnancy, many in the counterculture, following the adage "if it feels good, do it," engaged in sex without marriage, in what was called casual sex. Simultaneously, a growing number of openly gay individuals and associations campaigned for equal rights for homosexuals, the inclusion of lesbianism into the women's movement, and the removal of the stigma of depravity attached to being gay.

The rock music of the time both influenced and echoed the counterculture and sexual revolution. Lyrics extolling "sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll" became the hallmark of such popular groups as Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead and performers like Jim Morrison and Janis Joplin. In August 1969, four hundred thousand young people gathered for the Woodstock festival, reveling in the rock music, and openly sharing drugs, sexual

partners, and contempt for the Establishment. Some saw it as the dawning of an era of love and peace, the Age of Aquarius. In fact, the counterculture was already disintegrating, and in 1970 the Beatles disbanded. John Lennon sang, “The dream is over. What can I say?”

Meanwhile, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and New York Senator Robert Kennedy, following upon the earlier assassination of President John Kennedy, and then the violence outside the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, left the Democrats dispirited and with an image as the party of dissent and disorder. Both Richard M. Nixon, the Republican presidential candidate, and George C. Wallace, running on the American Independent ticket, capitalized on the tumult of campus and ghetto riots, and on the white middle-class resentment of blacks, hippies, and radical demonstrators. Hubert H. Humphrey, the Democratic candidate, won just 42.7 percent of the popular vote, compared to LBJ’s 61.1 percent in 1964.

Nixon, who had lost the presidential race against Kennedy at the start of the decade, presided in 1969 over a vastly changed nation. He would—after four more years of a war in Vietnam that would cost the US some 58,000 American deaths, 300,000 wounded, numerous soldiers with crippling and long-lasting psychological wounds, and the expenditure of at least \$150 billion—end the hostilities between the United States and North Vietnam, yet leave America’s enemy in a position to soon take over all of Vietnam. Nixon would also take major steps to end America’s Cold War with the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union. At the same time, the President intensified the fears and divisions among Americans, courting whites upset by the African American drive for racial equality and wooing those who took exception to the many programs aimed at the poor. He also took tough stands against the antiwar movement and the youth rebellion. Eventually, however, Nixon’s wars against those he opposed would unravel in the arrest of the Watergate burglars and the attempted cover-up of White House involvement in the crime. To avoid certain conviction in his impeachment trial, Nixon resigned in August 1973, in a nation suffused with distrust and disillusionment.

A decade that had begun with dreams of a new society, a great society, where no one was poor or exploited, where everyone would be educated, and where the sins of America’s past, like racism, would be redressed, ended with rejection of the liberal agenda of large-scale government intervention, and with liberal activism now blamed for the chaos consuming the country. Americans turned decisively to the right. Conservatism would be in the political saddle for much of the half century after the 1960s.

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*Harvard Sitkoff* is professor of history emeritus at the University of New Hampshire and the author of *The Struggle for Black Equality, 25th Anniversary Edition (2008)*, *Toward Freedom Land, The Long Struggle For Racial Equality in America (2010)*, and *King: Pilgrimage to the Mountaintop (2008)*.