

America's History

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Uncivil Wars: Liberal Crisis and Conservative Rebirth

1964-1972

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After you have studied this chapter and the related materials, you should be able to answer the following questions:

1. What were the most important parts of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society program?
2. What was the relationship between American domestic affairs and the conduct of the Vietnam War?
3. Why is 1968 considered a watershed year in modern American history?
4. Why does the term *counterculture* describe the behavior of many baby boomers during the late 1960s?
5. How did President Nixon approach the Vietnam War?
6. How did the Watergate scandal unravel the Nixon presidency?

The Great Society: Liberalism at High Tide

John F. Kennedy's Promise



President Kennedy practiced what became known as the “new politics,” an approach that emphasized youthful charisma, style, and personality more than issues and platforms. His youthful enthusiasm inspired a younger generation and laid the groundwork for an era of liberal reform. On November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas, President Kennedy was assassinated by Lee Harvey Oswald; Lyndon Johnson was sworn in as president. Kennedy's youthful image, the trauma of his assassination, and the sense that Americans had been robbed of a promising leader contributed to a powerful mystique that continues today.

Lyndon B. Johnson and the Liberal Resurgence

Lyndon Johnson was the opposite of Kennedy. A seasoned Texas politician and longtime Senate leader, Johnson was most at home in the back rooms of power. He was a rough-edged character who had scrambled his way up, without too many scruples, to wealth and political eminence. But he never forgot his modest, hill-country

origins or lost his sympathy for the downtrodden. Johnson lacked the Kennedy style, but he capitalized on Kennedy's assassination, applying his astonishing energy and negotiating skills to bring to fruition several of Kennedy's stalled programs and many more of his own, in the ambitious "**Great Society.**"



Lyndon Johnson touring poverty stricken Appalachia

On assuming the presidency, Johnson promptly pushed for civil rights legislation as a memorial to his slain predecessor. His motives were complex. As a southerner who had previously opposed civil rights for African Americans, Johnson wished to prove that he was more than a regional figure—he would be the president of all the people. Wherever he acted, Johnson pursued an ambitious goal of putting “an end to poverty in our time”; the “War on Poverty” expanded long-established social insurance programs, welfare programs, and public works programs. The **Office of Economic**

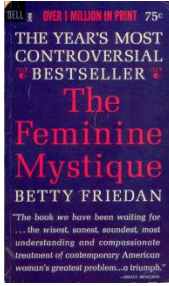
Opportunity, established by the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, created programs such as **Head Start, the Job Corps, Upward Bound, Volunteers in Service to America, and the Community Action Program.**

When Johnson defeated Republican senator Barry Goldwater for the presidency in 1964, he won in a landslide, providing a mandate for his administration. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 authorized \$1 billion in federal funds to benefit impoverished children; the Higher Education Act provided the first federal scholarships for college students. Another aspect of public welfare addressed by the Great Society was the environment; Johnson pressed for expansion of the national parks system, improvement of the nation's air and water, and increased land-use planning. Liberal Democrats brought about significant changes in immigration policy with the passage of the **Immigration Act of 1965**, which abandoned the quota system of the 1920s.

By the end of 1965, the Johnson administration had compiled the most impressive legislative record of liberal reforms since the New Deal; it had put issues of poverty, justice, and access at the center of national political life, and it expanded the federal government's role in protecting citizens' welfare. The results of the War on Poverty were that the poor were better off in an absolute sense, but they remained far behind the middle class in a relative sense. The proportion of Americans living below the poverty line dropped from 20 percent to 13 percent between 1963 and 1968.

The Women's Movement Reborn

Feminist concerns were kept alive in the 1950s and 1960s by working women, who campaigned for such things as maternity leave and equal pay for equal work. As the women's movement grew from influences such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, it generated an array of women-oriented services and organizations led by the white middle class, such as the National Organization for Women (NOW).



After the postwar baby boom, women were again having fewer children, aided by the birth control pill, first marketed in 1960. And as states liberalized divorce laws, more women were divorcing. Ironically, the calls by white middle-class women for reform helped to further fracture the fragile New Deal coalition.

The War in Vietnam, 1963–1968

Escalation under Johnson

When Johnson became president, he continued and accelerated U.S. involvement in Vietnam based on the policy of containing communism. In the summer of 1964, Johnson heard reports that North Vietnamese torpedo boats had fired on American destroyers in international waters. On August 7, 1964, Congress authorized the **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution**, which allowed Johnson to “take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.”



The Vietnam War in 1968

The Johnson administration moved toward the Americanization of the war with Operation Rolling Thunder, a protracted bombing campaign that by 1968 had dropped a million tons of bombs on North Vietnam. **Operation Rolling Thunder** intensified the North Vietnamese’s will to fight; the flow of their troops and supplies continued to the south unabated as the Communists rebuilt roads and bridges, moved munitions underground, and built networks of tunnels and shelters.

Simultaneously with the launch of Operation Rolling Thunder, the United States sent its first ground troops into combat in 1965; by 1966, more than 380,000 American soldiers were present in Vietnam; by 1968, more than 536,000 American soldiers were stationed in Vietnam. Hoping to win a war of attrition, the Johnson administration

assumed that American superiority in personnel and weaponry would ultimately triumph.

Public Opinion and the War

By the late 1960s, public opinion began to turn against the war in Vietnam; television had much to do with these attitudes as Vietnam was the first televised war. Despite

growing statements made on television, by 1967, many administration officials privately reached a more pessimistic conclusion regarding the war. The administration was accused of suffering from a “**credibility gap.**” In 1966 televised hearings by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee raised further questions about U.S. policy. Economic developments put Johnson and his advisors even more on the defensive as the costs of the war became evident as the growing federal deficit nudged the inflation rate upward, beginning the inflationary spiral that plagued the U.S. economy throughout the 1970s.

After the escalation in the spring of 1965, various antiwar coalitions organized several mass demonstrations in Washington. Participants shared a common skepticism about the means and aims of U.S. policy and argued that the war was antithetical to American ideals.

Rise of the Student Movement

The youth were among the key protestors of the era. In their manifesto, the **Port Huron Statement**, the **Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)** expressed their disillusionment with the consumer culture and the gulf between the prosperous and the poor and rejected Cold War ideology and foreign policy. The founders of SDS referred to themselves as the “**New Left**” to distinguish themselves from the “Old Left” of Communists and socialists of the 1930s and 1940s. At the University of California at Berkeley, the **Free Speech Movement** organized a sit-in in response to administrators’ attempts to ban political activity on campus.

Many protests centered on the draft, especially after the Selective Service system abolished automatic student deferments in January 1966. In public demonstrations of civil disobedience, opponents of the war burned their draft cards, closed down induction centers, and broke into Selective Service offices and destroyed records. As many universities’ research budgets came from Defense Department contracts student protestors demanded that the Reserve Officer Training Corps be removed from



1967 - Summer of Love

college campuses. The Johnson administration had to face the reality of large-scale opposition to the war. The 1967 Mobilization to End the War brought 100,000 protestors into the streets of San Francisco and over 250,000 in New York.

The “**hippie**” symbolized the new **counterculture**, a youthful movement that glorified liberation from traditional social strictures. Popular music by Pete Seeger, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan expressed political idealism, protest, and loss of patience with the war and was an important part of the counterculture. Beatlemania helped to deepen the

generational divide and paved the way for the more rebellious, angrier music of other British groups, notably the Rolling Stones. Drugs and sex intertwined with music as a

crucial element of the youth culture as celebrated at rock concerts attended by hundreds of thousands of people. In 1967, at the “world’s first Human Be-In” at San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park, Timothy Leary urged gatherers to “turn on, tune in, and drop out.” 1967 was also the “Summer of Love,” in which city neighborhoods swelled with young dropouts, drifters, and teenage runaways dubbed “flower children.”

Many young people stayed out of the counterculture and the antiwar movement, yet media coverage made it seem that all of America’s youth were rejecting political, social, and cultural norms.

Days of Rage, 1968–1972

Blood in the Streets

The Johnson administration’s hopes for Vietnam evaporated when the Viet Cong unleashed a massive assault, known as the **Tet offensive**, on major urban areas in South Vietnam. The attack made a mockery of official pronouncements that the United States was winning the war and swung public opinion more strongly against the



US Marines fight outside the US Embassy in Saigon during the Tet Offensive, 1968

conflict. Antiwar **Senator Eugene J. McCarthy**’s strong showing in the presidential primaries reflected profound public dissatisfaction with the course of the war and propelled **Senator Robert F. Kennedy** into the race on an antiwar platform.

On March 31, 1968, Johnson stunned the nation by announcing that he would not seek reelection; he vowed to devote his remaining months in office to the search for peace, and peace talks began in May 1968.

1968 also witnessed the assassination of Martin Luther King and its ensuing riots; student occupation of several buildings at Columbia University; a strike by students and labor that toppled the French government; and the assassination of Robert Kennedy, which shattered the dreams of those hoping for social change through political action. The Democratic Party never fully recovered from Johnson’s withdrawal and Robert Kennedy’s assassination.

The Antiwar Movement and the 1968 Election

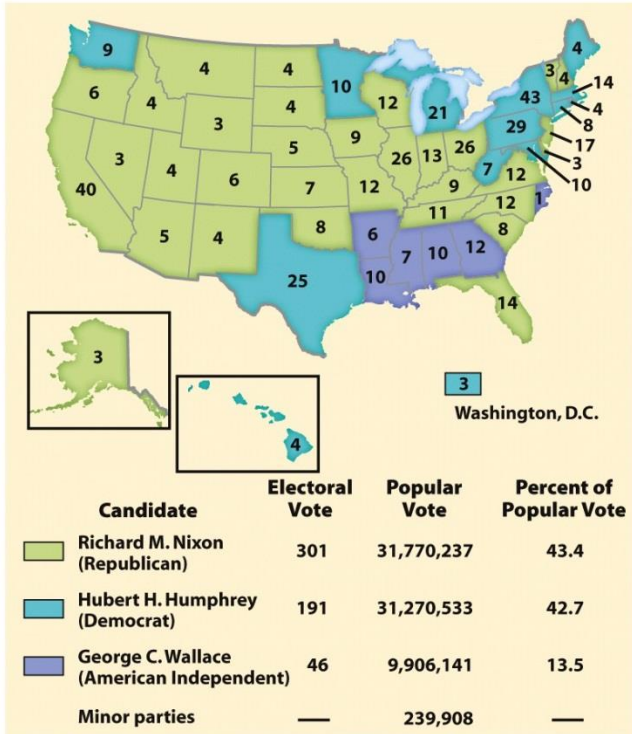


Violence at the Democratic Convention, 1968

At the Democratic Convention, the political divisions generated by the war consumed the party; outside the convention “yippies” demonstrated, diverting attention from the more serious and numerous activists who came to Chicago as delegates or volunteers. The Democratic mayor of Chicago, **Richard J. Daley**, called out the police to break up the demonstrations. In what was later described as a “police riot,” patrolmen attacked protestors at the convention with mace, tear gas, and clubs as TV viewers watched, which only

cemented a popular impression of the Democrats as the party of disorder. Democrats dispiritedly nominated **Hubert H. Humphrey** and approved a platform that endorsed continued fighting in Vietnam while diplomatic means to an end were explored.

Richard Nixon, after losing the presidential campaign in 1960 and the California gubernatorial race in 1962, tapped the increasingly conservative mood of the electorate in an amazing political comeback, winning the 1968 Republican presidential nomination and courting the “**silent majority**” of law-abiding Americans. **George**



The Presidential Election of 1968

Wallace, a third-party candidate, skillfully combined attacks on liberal intellectuals and government elites with denunciations of school segregation and forced busing.

Nixon offered a subtler version of Wallace’s populism, adopting what his advisers called the “**southern strategy**” of courting disaffected southern white voters tired of the civil rights agenda of the Democratic Party.

Nixon received 43.4 percent of the vote to Humphrey’s 42.7 percent, defeating him by only 510,000 votes out of the 73 million that were cast. The New Deal coalition of the past thirty years was now broken for the Democratic Party.

The Nationalist Turn

Vietnam and the increasingly radical youth rebellion intersected with the turn toward nationalism by young African American and Chicano activists.

Mexican Americans including Cesar Chavez marched in Los Angeles in 1970 against the war. The Black Panther Party and the National Black Antiwar Antidraft League spoke out against the war as well. Muhammad Ali, the most famous boxer in the world, refused to be inducted in the army.

Women’s Liberation

The late 1960s spawned a new brand of feminism: women’s liberation. Women’s liberation was loosely structured. The movement went public by protesting at the Miss America pageant in 1968. A national Women’s Strike for Equality in August of 1970 brought hundreds of thousands of women into the streets demanding women’s equality with men. The terms *sexism* and *chauvinism* became new words in American culture. “Sisterhood” often did not include women of color because they were more focused on the shared struggle of the civil rights movement.

Women’s political mobilization resulted in significant legislative and administrative gains, such as **Title IX** of the 1972 Educational Amendments Act, which prohibited colleges and universities that received federal funds from discriminating on the basis of sex. Founded by Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm and Bella Abzug in 1971, the National Women’s Political Caucus promoted the election of women to public office. In 1972, Congress authorized child-care deductions for working parents; in 1974, the Equal Credit Opportunity Act improved women’s access to credit.

Stonewall and Gay Liberation

The vast majority of gay men and lesbians remained “in the closet.” Homosexuality was illegal in the vast majority of states—sodomy statutes outlawed same-sex relations, and police used other morals laws to harass and arrest gay men and lesbians. In the late 1960s inspired by Black Power and the women’s movement, gay activists increasingly demanded unconditional recognition of their rights and encouraged people to “Come Out!”

The new gay liberation found multiple expressions in major cities across the country, but a defining event occurred in New York’s Greenwich Village when a local gay bar called the **Stonewall Inn** was raided by police in the summer of 1969. Its patrons, including gay men, lesbians, transvestites, and transsexuals, rioted for two days.

The gay liberation movement grew quickly after Stonewall. Local gay and lesbian organizations proliferated, and activists began pushing for non-discrimination ordinances and consensual sex laws at the state level. By 1975, the National Gay Task Force and several other national organizations lobbied Congress, served as media watchdogs, and advanced suits in the courts.

Richard Nixon and the Politics of the Silent Majority

Nixon’s War in Vietnam

When it came to Vietnam, Nixon picked up where Johnson had left off. Abandoning Vietnam, Nixon insisted, would damage America’s “credibility” and make the country seem “a pitiful, helpless giant.” Nixon wanted peace, but only “peace with honor.”



National Guard troops at Kent State University, 1970

To neutralize criticism at home, Nixon began delegating the ground fighting to the South Vietnamese. Under this new policy of “**Vietnamization**,” American troop levels dropped from 543,000 in 1968 to 334,000 in 1971 to barely 24,000 by early 1973.

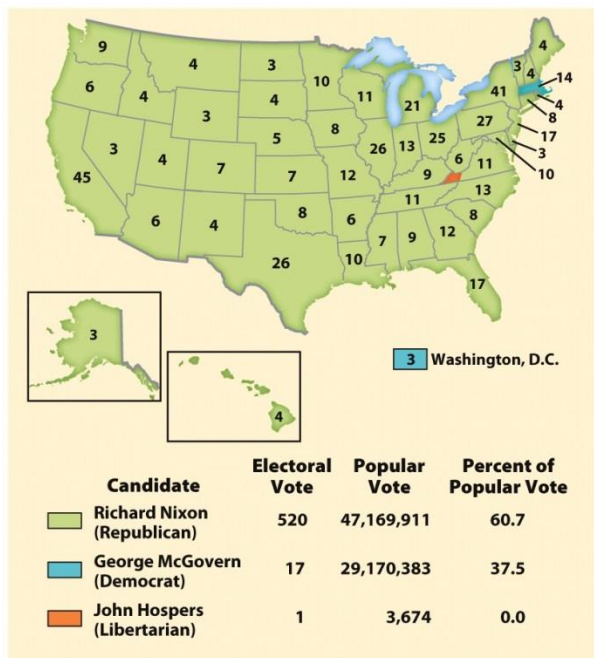
Far from abating, however, the antiwar movement intensified. In November 1969, half a million demonstrators staged a huge protest in Washington. On April 30, 1970, as part of a secret bombing campaign against Vietminh (Vietnamese liberation army) supply lines operating in neutral Cambodia, American troops destroyed enemy bases there. When

news of the invasion of Cambodia came out, American campuses exploded in outrage. On May 4, 1970, at Kent State University in Ohio, panicky National Guardsmen fired into an antiwar rally, killing four students and wounding eleven. At Jackson State College in Mississippi, Guardsmen stormed a dormitory, killing two black students.

Nixon’s policy of **détente** was to seek peaceful coexistence with the Soviet Union and Communist China and to link these overtures of friendship with a plan to end the Vietnam War, a war fought ostensibly to halt the spread of communism. He traveled to Moscow to sign the first **Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT)** between the United States and the Soviet Union. The treaty limited the production and deployment of ICBMs and ABMs and signified that the United States could no longer afford massive military spending to regain the nuclear and military superiority it had enjoyed after World War II. Nixon traveled to China in 1972, the first sitting U.S. president to do so, in a symbolic visit that set the stage for the establishment of formal diplomatic relations.

To strengthen his negotiating position at the Paris Peace Talks with North Vietnam, Nixon stepped up military action with a series of B-52 bombings; the Paris Peace Accords were signed on January 27, 1973. The South Vietnamese government soon fell to Communist forces; horrified Americans watched as American embassy personnel and Vietnamese citizens struggled to board helicopters leaving Saigon before North

Vietnamese troops entered the city. On April 29, 1975, Vietnam was reunited, and Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City in honor of the Communist leader who had died in 1969. More than 58,000 Americans died and over 300,000 were wounded during a war that cost over \$150 billion and decreased Americans’ confidence in their government system.



Presidential Election of 1972

The 1972 Election

The disarray within the Democratic Party over Vietnam and civil rights gave Nixon’s campaign a decisive edge. Nixon’s advantages against his weak opponent, Senator George McGovern, and a short-term upturn in the economy favored the Republicans.

Nixon appealed to the “silent majority” of non-protesters and easily won reelection with 61 percent of the popular vote, carrying every state except Massachusetts and the District of Columbia, although Democrats maintained control of both houses of Congress.

Watergate and the Fall of a President

In June 1972, five men with connections to the Nixon administration were arrested for breaking into the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee at the Watergate apartment complex in Washington. In an abuse of presidential power, the White House had established a clandestine intelligence group known as the “**plumbers**” to plug government information leaks and implement tactics to harass the administration’s opponents. The activities of the “plumbers” were financed by massive illegal fundraising efforts by Nixon’s Committee to Re-Elect the President (known as CREEP).

The White House denied any involvement in the break-in, but investigations revealed that Nixon ordered his chief of staff to instruct the CIA to tell the FBI not to probe too deeply into connections between the White House and the burglars. In February 1973,



the Senate established an investigative committee that began holding nationally televised hearings in May, during which Jeb Magruder confessed his guilt and implicated former Attorney General John Mitchell, White House counsel John Dean, and others. Dean, in turn, implicated Nixon in the plot, and another Nixon aide revealed that Nixon had installed a secret taping system in the Oval Office. Nixon stonewalled the committee’s demand that he surrender the tapes, citing executive privilege and national security. He finally released them, but a suspicious eighteen-minute gap remained.

On June 30, 1974, the House of Representatives voted on three articles of impeachment against Nixon: obstruction of justice, abuse of power, and subverting the Constitution. Facing certain conviction if impeached, on August 9, 1974, Nixon became the first U.S. president to resign. Vice President Gerald Ford was sworn in as president. A month later, he granted Nixon a “full, free, and absolute” pardon.

Congress adopted several reforms in response to the abuses of the Nixon administration, such as the **War Powers Act**, which reined in the president’s ability to deploy U.S. forces without congressional approval. In 1974, a strengthened **Freedom of Information Act** gave citizens greater access to files that federal government agencies had amassed on them. The **Fair Campaign Practices Act** of 1974 limited campaign contributions and provided for stricter accountability and public financing of presidential campaigns, but it contained a loophole for contributions from political action committees (PACs).

An Historian’s View: Assessing the Sixties

Harvard Sitkoff - *Professor of History Emeritus at the University of New Hampshire*

Forty 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.

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.



Harvard Sitkoff

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?”

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.