

## PROMISE AND TURMOIL, THE 1960S

*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—born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage. . . . Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty.*

John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961

**T**he 1960s were in many ways both the best and the worst of times. On the one hand, the postwar economic prosperity peaked in the 1960s. At the same time, racial strife, a controversial war in Vietnam, and student radicalism started to tear the country apart. The proud superpower began to learn its limits both in the jungles of Vietnam and on the streets at home.

### John F. Kennedy's New Frontier

The decade began with an election that proved symbolic of the changes that were to come.

#### *The Election of 1960*

President Eisenhower had not been able to transfer his popularity to other Republicans, and the Democrats retained control of Congress through Eisenhower's last two years in office.

**Nixon** At their 1960 convention, the Republicans unanimously nominated Richard Nixon for president. During his eight years as Eisenhower's vice president, Nixon had gained a reputation as a statesman in his diplomatic travels to Europe and South America. In a visit to Moscow, he stood up to Nikita Khrushchev in the so-called kitchen debate (which took place in a model of an American kitchen) over the relative merits of capitalism and communism. Still young at 47, Nixon was known to be a tough and seasoned campaigner.

**Kennedy** Early in 1960, several Democrats believed they had a chance at the nomination. Liberal Democrats Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota and Adlai Stevenson of Illinois were in the contest, and southern Democrats supported

the Senate majority leader, Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas. In the primaries, however, a charismatic, wealthy, and youthful 43-year-old senator from Massachusetts, John F. Kennedy, defeated his rivals. Going into the convention, he had just enough delegates behind him to win the nomination. To balance the ticket, the New Englander chose a Texan, Lyndon B. Johnson, to be his vice presidential running mate—a choice that proved critical in carrying southern states in the November election.

**Campaign** The new medium of television was perhaps the most decisive factor in the close race between the two youthful campaigners, Nixon and Kennedy. In the first of four televised debates—the first such debates in campaign history—Kennedy appeared on-screen as more vigorous and comfortable than the pale and tense Nixon. On the issues, Kennedy attacked the Eisenhower administration for the recent recession and for permitting the Soviets to take the lead in the arms race. In reality, what Kennedy called a “missile gap” was actually in the U.S. favor, but his charges seemed plausible after *Sputnik*. As the first Catholic presidential candidate since Al Smith (1928), Kennedy’s religion became an issue in the minds of some voters. Religious loyalties helped Nixon in rural Protestant areas but helped Kennedy in the large cities.

**Results** In one of the closest elections in U.S. history, Kennedy defeated Nixon by a little more than 100,000 popular votes, and by a slightly wider margin of 303 to 219 in the electoral college. Many Republicans, including Nixon, felt the election had been stolen by Democratic political machines in states like Illinois and Texas by stuffing ballot boxes with “votes” of the deceased.

### ***Domestic Policy***

At 43, Kennedy was the youngest candidate ever to be elected president. His energy and sharp wit gave a new, personal style to the presidency. In his inaugural address, Kennedy spoke of “the torch being passed to a new generation” and promised to lead the nation into a New Frontier. The Democratic president surrounded himself with both business executives such as Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and academics such as economist John Kenneth Galbraith. For the sensitive position of attorney general, the president chose his younger brother, Robert. John Kennedy and his wife, Jacqueline (“Jackie”), brought style, glamour, and an appreciation of the arts to the White House. The press loved Kennedy’s news conferences, and some later likened his administration to the mythical kingdom of Camelot and the court of King Arthur, the subject of a then-popular Broadway musical.

**New Frontier Programs** The promises of the New Frontier proved difficult to keep. Kennedy called for aid to education, federal support of health care, urban renewal, and civil rights, but his domestic programs languished in Congress. While few of Kennedy’s proposals became law during his thousand-day administration, most were passed later under President Johnson.

On economic issues, Kennedy had some success. He faced down big steel executives over a price increase he charged was inflationary and achieved a price rollback. In addition, the economy was stimulated by increased spending

for defense and space exploration, as the president committed the nation to land on the moon by the end of the decade.

## **Foreign Affairs**

With his domestic programs often blocked, Kennedy increasingly turned his attention to foreign policy issues. In 1961, he set up the Peace Corps, an organization that recruited young American volunteers to give technical aid to developing countries. Also in 1961, he organized the Alliance for Progress, which promoted land reform and economic development in Latin America. Kennedy did persuade Congress to pass the Trade Expansion Act of 1962, which authorized tariff reductions with the recently formed European Economic Community (Common Market) of Western European nations.

**Bay of Pigs Invasion (1961)** Kennedy made a major blunder shortly after entering office. He approved a Central Intelligence Agency scheme planned under the Eisenhower administration to use Cuban exiles to overthrow Fidel Castro's regime in Cuba. In April 1961, the CIA-trained force of Cubans landed at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba but failed to set off a general uprising as planned. Trapped on the beach, the anti-Castro Cubans had little choice but to surrender after Kennedy rejected the idea of using U.S. forces to save them. Castro used the failed invasion to get even more aid from the Soviet Union and to strengthen his grip on power.

**Berlin Wall** Trying to shake off the embarrassment of the Bay of Pigs defeat, Kennedy agreed to meet Soviet premier Khrushchev in Vienna in the summer of 1961. Khrushchev seized the opportunity in Vienna to threaten the president by renewing Soviet demands that the United States pull its troops out of Berlin. Kennedy refused. In August, the East Germans, with Soviet backing, built a wall around West Berlin. Its purpose was to stop East Germans from fleeing to West Germany. As the wall was being built, Soviet and U.S. tanks faced off in Berlin. Kennedy called up the reserves, but he made no move to stop the completion of the wall. In 1963, the president traveled to West Berlin to assure its residents of continuing U.S. support. To cheering crowds, he proclaimed: "Freedom has many difficulties and democracy is not perfect, but we have never had to put up a wall to keep our people in. . . . As a free man, I take pride in the words, '*Ich bin ein Berliner*' [I am a Berliner]."

The Berlin Wall stood as a gloomy symbol of the Cold War until it was torn down by rebellious East Germans in 1989.

**Cuban Missile Crisis (1962)** The most dangerous challenge from the Soviets came in October 1962. U.S. reconnaissance planes discovered that the Russians were building underground sites in Cuba for the launching of offensive missiles that could reach the United States in minutes. Kennedy responded by announcing to the world that he was setting up a naval blockade of Cuba until the weapons were removed. A full-scale nuclear war between the superpowers seemed likely if Soviet ships challenged the U.S. naval blockade. After days of tension, Khrushchev finally agreed to remove the missiles from Cuba



in exchange for Kennedy's pledge not to invade the island nation and to later remove some U.S. missiles from Turkey.

The Cuban missile crisis had a sobering effect on both sides. Soon afterward, a telecommunications hotline was established between Washington and Moscow to make it possible for the leaders of the two countries to talk directly during a crisis. In 1963, the Soviet Union and the United States—along with nearly 100 other nations—signed the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty to end the testing of nuclear weapons in the atmosphere. This first step in controlling the testing of nuclear arms was offset by a new round in the arms race for developing missile and warhead superiority.



**Flexible Response** A different Cold War challenge were the many “brush-fire wars” in Africa and Southeast Asia, in which insurgent forces were often aided by Soviet arms and training. Such conflicts in the Congo (later renamed Zaire) in Africa and in Laos and Vietnam in Southeast Asia convinced the Kennedy administration to adopt a policy of flexible response. Moving away from Dulles’ idea of massive retaliation and reliance on nuclear weapons, Kennedy and McNamara increased spending on conventional (nonnuclear) arms and mobile military forces. While the flexible-response policy reduced the risk of using nuclear weapons, it also increased the temptation to send elite special forces, such as the Green Berets, into combat all over the globe.

### ***Assassination in Dallas***

After just two and a half years in office, President Kennedy’s “one brief, shining moment” was cut short on November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas, as two

bullets from an assassin's rifle found their mark. After the shocking news of Kennedy's murder, millions of stunned Americans were fixed to their televisions for days and even witnessed the killing of the alleged assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, just two days after the president's death. The Warren Commission, headed by Chief Justice Earl Warren, concluded that Oswald was the lone assassin. For years afterward, however, unanswered questions about the events in Dallas produced dozens of conspiracy theories pointing to possible involvement by organized crime, Castro, the CIA, and the FBI. For many Americans, the tragedy in Dallas and doubts about the Warren Commission marked the beginning of a loss of credibility in government.

**In Retrospect** At the time, John Kennedy's presidency inspired many idealistic young Americans to take seriously his inaugural message and to "ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." However, more recently, his belligerent Cold War rhetoric has drawn criticism from some historians. Nevertheless, the Kennedy legend has endured.

## Lyndon Johnson's Great Society

Two hours after the Kennedy assassination, Lyndon Johnson took the presidential oath of office aboard a plane at the Dallas airport. On the one hand, as a native of rural west Texas and a graduate of a little-known teacher's college, he seemed very unsophisticated compared to the wealthy, Harvard-educated Kennedy. On the other hand, Johnson was a skilled politician who had started his career as a devoted Roosevelt Democrat during the Great Depression.

As the new president, Johnson was determined to expand the social reforms of the New Deal. During his almost 30 years in Congress, he had learned how to get things done. Shortly after taking office, Johnson persuaded Congress to pass (1) an expanded version of Kennedy's civil rights bill, and (2) Kennedy's proposal for an income tax cut. The latter measure sparked an increase in jobs, consumer spending, and a long period of economic expansion in the sixties.

### *The War on Poverty*

Michael Harrington's best-selling book on poverty, *The Other America* (1962), helped to focus national attention on the 40 million Americans still living in poverty. Johnson responded by declaring in 1964 an "unconditional war on poverty." The Democratic Congress gave the president almost everything that he asked for by creating the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) and providing this antipoverty agency with a billion-dollar budget. The OEO sponsored a wide variety of self-help programs for the poor, such as Head Start for preschoolers, the Job Corps for vocational education, literacy programs, and legal services. The controversial Community Action Program allowed the poor to run antipoverty programs in their own neighborhoods.

Like the New Deal, some of Johnson's programs produced results, while others did not. Nevertheless, before being cut back to pay for the far more costly Vietnam War, the War on Poverty did significantly reduce the number of American families living in poverty.

**The Election of 1964**

Johnson and his running mate, Senator Hubert Humphrey, went into the 1964 election with a clearly liberal agenda. In contrast, the Republicans nominated a staunch conservative, Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, who advocated ending the welfare state, including TVA and Social Security. A TV ad by the Democrats pictured Goldwater as a dangerous extremist, who would be quick to involve the United States in nuclear war. However, the doomed Goldwater campaign did energize young conservatives and introduced new conservative voices, such as former film actor and TV host, Ronald Reagan of California.

Johnson won the election by a landslide, taking 61 percent of the popular vote—a higher figure than FDR’s landslide of 1936. In addition, Democrats now controlled both houses of Congress by better than a two-thirds margin. A Democratic president and Congress were in a position to pass the economic and social reforms originally proposed by President Truman in the 1940s.

**Great Society Reforms**

Johnson’s list of legislative achievements from 1963 to 1966 is long and includes new programs that would have lasting effects on U.S. society. Several of the most significant ones are listed in the table below.

Great Society Programs		
Title	Year Passed	Program
Food Stamp Act	1964	Expanded the federal program to help poor people buy food
National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities	1965	Provided federal funding for the arts and for creative and scholarly projects
Medicare	1965	Provided health insurance for all people 65 and older
Medicaid	1965	Provided funds to states to pay for medical care for the poor and disabled
Elementary and Secondary Education Act	1965	Provided federal funds to poor school districts; funds for special education programs; and funds to expand Head Start, an early childhood education program
Higher Education Act	1965	Provided federal scholarships for post-secondary education
Immigration Act	1965	Abolished discriminatory quotas based on national origins
Child Nutrition Act	1966	Added breakfasts to the school lunch program



In addition to the programs listed in the table, Congress increased funding for mass transit, public housing, rent subsidies for low-income people, and crime prevention. Johnson also established two new cabinet departments: the Department of Transportation (DOT), and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Congress, in response to Ralph Nader's book *Unsafe at Any Speed* (1965), also passed regulations of the automobile industry that would save hundreds of thousands of lives in the following years. Clean air and water laws were enacted in part as a response to Rachel Carson's exposé of pesticides, *Silent Spring* (1962). Federal parks and wilderness areas were expanded. LBJ's wife, Lady Bird Johnson, contributed to improving the environment with her Beautify America campaign, which resulted in the Highway Beautification Act that removed billboards from federal roads.

**Evaluating the Great Society** Critics have attacked Johnson's Great Society for making unrealistic promises to eliminate poverty, for creating a centralized welfare state, and for being inefficient and very costly. On the other hand, defenders point out that these programs gave vitally needed assistance to millions of Americans who had previously been forgotten or ignored—the poor, the disabled, and the elderly. Johnson himself would jeopardize the Democrat's vast domestic achievements by escalating the war in Vietnam—a war that resulted in higher taxes and inflation.

### ***Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965***

Ironically, a southern president succeeded in persuading Congress to enact the most important civil rights laws since Reconstruction. Even before the 1964 election, Johnson managed to persuade both a majority of Democrats and some Republicans in Congress to pass the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which made segregation illegal in all public facilities, including hotels and restaurants, and gave the federal government additional powers to enforce school desegregation. This act also set up the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to end discrimination in employment on the basis of race, religion, sex, or national origin. Also in 1964, the 24th Amendment was ratified. It abolished the practice of collecting a poll tax, one of the measures that, for decades, had discouraged poor people from voting.

The following year, after the killings and brutality in Selma, Alabama, against the voting rights marches led by Martin Luther King Jr., President Johnson persuaded Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This act ended literacy tests and provided federal registrars in areas where blacks were kept from voting. The impact was most dramatic in the Deep South, where African Americans could vote for the first time since the Reconstruction era.

### **Civil Rights and Conflict**

The civil rights movement gained momentum during the Kennedy and Johnson presidencies. A very close election in 1960 influenced President Kennedy not to press the issue of civil rights, lest he alienate white voters. But the defiance of the governors of Alabama and Mississippi to federal court rulings on integration

forced a showdown. In 1962, James Meredith, a young African American air force veteran, attempted to enroll in the University of Mississippi. A federal court guaranteed his right to attend. Supporting Meredith and the court order, Kennedy sent in 400 federal marshals and 3,000 troops to control mob violence and protect Meredith's right to attend class.

A similar incident occurred in Alabama in 1963. Governor George Wallace tried to stop an African American student from entering the University of Alabama. Once again, President Kennedy sent troops to the scene, and the student was admitted.

### ***The Leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.***

Civil rights activists and freedom riders who traveled through the South registering African Americans to vote and integrating public places were met with beatings, bombings, and murder by white extremists. Recognized nationally as the leader of the civil rights movement, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. remained committed to nonviolent protests against segregation. In 1963, he and some followers were jailed in Birmingham, Alabama, for what local authorities judged to be an illegal march. The jailing of King, however, proved to be a milestone in the civil rights movement because most Americans believed King to have been jailed unjustly. From his jail cell, King wrote an essay, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in which he argued:

[W]e need emulate neither the "do-nothingism" of the complacent nor the hatred and despair of the black nationalist. For there is the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest. I am grateful to God that, through the influence of the Negro church, the way of non-violence became an integral part of our struggle. . . .

One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. . . .

King's letter moved President Kennedy to support a tougher civil rights bill.

**March on Washington (1963)** In August 1963, King led one of the largest and most successful demonstrations in U.S. history. About 200,000 blacks and whites took part in the peaceful March on Washington in support of the civil rights bill. The highlight of the demonstration was King's impassioned "I Have a Dream" speech, which appealed for the end of racial prejudice and ended with everyone in the crowd singing "We Shall Overcome."

**March to Montgomery (1965)** A voting rights march from Selma, Alabama, to the state capitol of Montgomery was met with beatings and tear gas in what became known as "Bloody Sunday." Televised pictures of the violence



proved a turning point in the civil rights movement. The national outrage moved President Johnson to send federal troops to protect King and other marchers in another attempt to petition the state government. As a result, Congress passed the powerful Voting Rights Act of 1965. Nevertheless, young African Americans were losing patience with the slow progress toward equality and the continued violence against their people by white extremists.

### ***Black Muslims and Malcolm X***

Seeking a new cultural identity based on Africa and Islam, the Black Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad preached black nationalism, separatism, and self-improvement. The movement had already attracted thousands of followers by the time a young man became a convert while serving in prison. He adopted the name Malcolm X. Leaving prison in 1952, Malcolm X acquired a reputation as the movement's most controversial voice. He criticized King as "an Uncle Tom" (subservient to whites) and advocated self-defense—using black violence to counter white violence. He eventually left the Black Muslims and moved away from defending violence, but he was assassinated by black opponents in 1965. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* remains an engaging testimony to one man's development from a petty criminal into a major leader.

### ***Race Riots and Black Power***

The radicalism of Malcolm X influenced the thinking of young blacks in civil rights organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Stokely Carmichael, the chairman of SNCC, repudiated nonviolence and advocated "black power" (especially economic power) and racial separatism. In 1966, the Black Panthers were organized by Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, and other militants as a revolutionary socialist movement advocating self-rule for American blacks.

**Riots** Shortly after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the arrest of a young black motorist by white police in the black neighborhood of Watts in Los Angeles sparked a six-day race riot that killed 34 people and destroyed over 700 buildings. Race riots continued to erupt each summer in black neighborhoods of major cities through 1968 with increasing casualties and destruction of property. Rioters shouting slogans—"Burn baby, burn" and "Get whitey"—made whites suspect that black extremists and revolutionaries were behind the violence. There was little evidence, however, that the small Black Power movement was responsible for the violence. A federal investigation of the many riots, the Kerner Commission, concluded in late 1968 that racism and segregation were chiefly responsible and that the United States was becoming "two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal." By the mid-1960s, the issue of civil rights had spread far beyond *de jure* segregation practiced under the law in the South and now included the *de facto* segregation and discrimination caused by racist attitudes in the North and West.

**Murder in Memphis** Martin Luther King, Jr., received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, but his nonviolent approach was under increasing pressure from

all sides. His effort to use peaceful marches in urban centers of the North, such as Chicago, met with little success. King also broke with President Johnson over the Vietnam War because that war was beginning to drain money from social programs. In April 1968, the nation went into shock over the news that King, while standing on a motel balcony in Memphis, Tennessee, had been shot and killed by a white man. Massive riots erupted in 168 cities across the country, leaving at least 46 people dead. The violence did not reflect the ideals of the murdered leader, but it did reveal the anger and frustrations among African Americans in both the North and the South. The violence also fed a growing “white backlash,” especially among white blue-collar voters, to the civil rights movement, which was soon reflected in election results.

## **The Warren Court and Individual Rights**

As chief justice of the Supreme Court from 1953 to 1969, Earl Warren had an impact on the nation comparable to that of John Marshall in the early 1800s. Warren’s decision in the desegregation case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) was by far the most important case of the 20th century involving race relations. Then in the 1960s the Warren Court made a series of decisions that profoundly affected the criminal justice system, state political systems, and the definition of individual rights. Before Warren’s tenure as chief justice, the Supreme Court had concentrated on protecting property rights. During and after his tenure, the Court focused more on protecting individual rights.

### ***Criminal Justice***

Several decisions of the Warren Court concerned a defendant’s rights. Four of the most important were the following:

- *Mapp v. Ohio* (1961) ruled that illegally seized evidence cannot be used in court against the accused.
- *Gideon v. Wainwright* (1963) required that state courts provide counsel (services of an attorney) for indigent (poor) defendants.
- *Escobedo v. Illinois* (1964) required the police to inform an arrested person of his or her right to remain silent.
- *Miranda v. Arizona* (1966) extended the ruling in *Escobedo* to include the right to a lawyer being present during questioning by the police.

### ***Reapportionment***

Before 1962, many states included at least one house of its legislature (usually the senate) that had districts that strongly favored rural areas to the disadvantage of cities. In the landmark case of *Baker v. Carr* (1962), the Warren Court declared this practice unconstitutional. In *Baker* and later cases, the Court established the principle of “one man, one vote,” meaning that election districts would have to be redrawn to provide equal representation for all citizens.

## ***Freedom of Expression and Privacy***

Other rulings by the Warren Court extended the rights mentioned in the 1st Amendment to protect the actions of protesters, to permit greater latitude under freedom of the press, to ban religious activities sponsored by public schools, and to guarantee adults' rights to use contraceptives.

- *Yates v. United States* (1957) said that the 1st Amendment protected radical and revolutionary speech, even by Communists, unless it was a “clear and present danger” to the safety of the country.
- *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) ruled that state laws requiring prayers and Bible readings in the public schools violated the 1st Amendment’s provision for separation of church and state.
- *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965) ruled that, in recognition of a citizen’s right to privacy, a state could not prohibit the use of contraceptives by adults. (This privacy case provided the foundation for later cases establishing a woman’s right to an abortion.)

The Warren Court’s defense of the rights of unpopular individuals, including people accused of crimes, provoked a storm of controversy. Critics called for Warren’s impeachment. Both supporters and critics agreed that the Warren Court profoundly changed the interpretation of constitutional rights.

## **Social Revolutions and Cultural Movements**

In the early and mid-1960s, various liberal groups began to identify with blacks’ struggle against oppressive controls and laws. The first such group to rebel against established authority were college and university students.

### ***Student Movement and the New Left***

In 1962, a newly formed radical student organization called Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) held a meeting in Port Huron, Michigan. Following the leadership of Tom Hayden, the group issued a declaration of purposes known as the Port Huron Statement. It called for university decisions to be made through participatory democracy, so that students would have a voice in decisions affecting their lives. Activists and intellectuals who supported Hayden’s ideas became known as the New Left.

The first major student protest took place in 1964 on the Berkeley campus of the University of California. Calling their cause the Free Speech Movement, Berkeley students demanded an end to university restrictions on student political activities. By the mid-1960s, students across the country were protesting a variety of university rules, including those against drinking and dorm visits by members of the opposite sex. They also demanded a greater voice in the government of the university. Student demonstrations grew with the escalation of U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Hundreds of campuses were disrupted or closed down by antiwar protests.



The most radical fringe of the SDS, known as the Weathermen, embraced violence and vandalism in their attacks on American institutions. In the eyes of most Americans, the Weathermen's extremist acts and language discredited the early idealism of the New Left.

## ***Counterculture***

The political protests of the New Left went hand in hand with a new counterculture that was expressed by young people in rebellious styles of dress, music, drug use, and, for some, communal living. The apparent dress code of the "hippies" and "flower children" of the 1960s included long hair, beards, beads, and jeans. The folk music of Joan Baez and Bob Dylan gave voice to the younger generation's protests, while the rock music of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Jim Morrison, and Janis Joplin provided the beat and lyrics for the counterculture. In 1969, a gathering of thousands of young people at the Woodstock Music Festival in upper New York State reflected the zenith of the counterculture. However, as a result of experimenting with hallucinogenic drugs such as LSD or becoming addicted to various other drugs, some young people destroyed their lives. The counterculture's excesses and the economic uncertainties of the times led to its demise in the 1970s.

**In Retrospect** The generation of baby boomers that came of age in the 1960s believed fervently in the ideals of a democratic society. They hoped to slay the dragons of unresponsive authority, poverty, racism, and war. However, the impatience of some activists with change, the use of violence, and the spread of self-destructive behavior discredited their cause in the eyes of others, particularly older Americans.

## ***Sexual Revolution***

One aspect of the counterculture that continued beyond the 1960s was a change in many Americans' attitudes toward sexual expression. Traditional beliefs about sexual conduct had originally been challenged in the late 1940s and 1950s by the pioneering surveys of sexual practice conducted by Alfred Kinsey. His research indicated that premarital sex, marital infidelity, and homosexuality were more common than anyone had suspected. Medicine (antibiotics for venereal disease) and science (the introduction of the birth control pill in 1960) also contributed to changing attitudes about engaging in casual sex with a number of partners. Moreover, overtly sexual themes in advertisements, magazines, and movies made sex appear to be just one more consumer product.

How deeply the so-called sexual revolution changed the behavior of the majority of Americans is open to question. There is little doubt, however, that premarital sex, contraception, abortion, and homosexuality became practiced more openly. Later, in the 1980s, there was a general reaction against the loosened moral codes as many blamed it for an increase in illegitimate births, especially among teenagers, an increase in rape and sexual abuse, and the spread of a deadly new disease, AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome).

## **The Women's Movement**

The increased education and employment of women in the 1950s, the civil rights movement, and the sexual revolution all contributed to a renewal of the women's movement in the 1960s. Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) gave the movement a new direction by encouraging middle-class women to seek fulfillment in professional careers in addition to filling the roles of wife, mother, and homemaker. In 1966, Friedan helped found the National Organization for Women (NOW), which adopted the activist tactics of other civil rights movements to secure equal treatment of women, especially for job opportunities. By this time, Congress had already enacted two antidiscrimination laws: the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. These measures prohibited discrimination in employment and compensation on the basis of gender, but had been poorly enforced.

**Campaign for the ERA** Feminists achieved a major legislative victory in 1972 when Congress passed the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). This proposed constitutional amendment stated: "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex." Although NOW and other groups campaigned hard for the ratification of the ERA, it just missed acceptance by the required 38 states. It was defeated in part because of a growing reaction against feminism by conservatives who feared the movement threatened the traditional roles of women.

**Achievements** Even without the ERA, the women's movement accomplished fundamental changes in attitudes and hiring practices. In increasing numbers, women moved into professions previously dominated by men: business, law, medicine, and politics. Although women still experienced the "glass ceiling" in the corporate world, American society at the beginning of the 21st century was less and less a man's world.

## **The Vietnam War to 1969**

None of the divisive issues in the 1960s was as tragic as the war in Vietnam. Some 2.7 million Americans served in the conflict and 58,000 died in a failed effort to prevent the takeover of South Vietnam by communist North Vietnam.

### **Early Stages**

Vietnam was hardly mentioned in the election debates of 1960 between Nixon and Kennedy. U.S. involvement was minimal at that time, but every year thereafter, it loomed larger and eventually dominated the presidency of Lyndon Johnson and the thoughts of the nation.

**Buildup Under Kennedy** President Kennedy adopted Eisenhower's domino theory that, if Communist forces overthrew South Vietnam's government, they would quickly overrun other countries of Southeast Asia—Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Kennedy therefore continued U.S. military aid to South Vietnam's regime and significantly increased the number of military "advisers," who trained the South Vietnamese army and

guarded weapons and facilities. By 1963, there were more than 16,000 U.S. troops in South Vietnam in support, not combat, roles. They provided training and supplies for South Vietnam's armed forces and helped create "strategic hamlets" (fortified villages).

However, the U.S. ally in South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, was not popular. He and his government steadily lost the support of peasants in the countryside, while in the capital city of Saigon, Buddhist monks set themselves on fire in the streets to protest Diem's policies. Kennedy began to question whether the South Vietnamese could win "their war" against Communist insurgents. Just two weeks before Kennedy himself was assassinated in Dallas, Diem was overthrown and killed by South Vietnamese generals. Historians later learned that the generals acted with the knowledge of the Kennedy administration.

**Tonkin Gulf Resolution** Lyndon Johnson became president just as things began to fall apart in South Vietnam. The country had seven different governments in 1964. During the U.S. presidential campaign, Republican candidate Barry Goldwater attacked the Johnson administration for giving only weak support to South Vietnam's fight against the Vietcong (Communist guerrillas). In August 1964, President Johnson and Congress took a fateful turn in policy. Johnson made use of a naval incident in the Gulf of Tonkin off Vietnam's coast to secure congressional authorization for U.S. forces going into combat. Allegedly, North Vietnamese gunboats had fired on U.S. warships in the Gulf of Tonkin. The president persuaded Congress that this aggressive act was sufficient reason for a military response by the United States. Congress voted its approval of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, which basically gave the president, as commander in chief, a blank check to take "all necessary measures" to protect U.S. interests in Vietnam.

Critics later called the full-scale use of U.S. forces in Vietnam an illegal war, because the war was not declared by Congress, as the Constitution requires. Congress, however, did not have this concern and did not withdraw its resolution. Until 1968, most Americans supported the effort to contain communism in Southeast Asia. Johnson was caught in a political dilemma to which there was no good solution. How could he stop the defeat of a weak and unpopular government in South Vietnam without making it into an American war—a war whose cost would doom his Great Society programs? If he pulled out, he would be seen as weak and lose public support.

### ***Escalating the War***

In 1965, the U.S. military and most of the president's foreign policy advisers recommended expanding operations in Vietnam to save the Saigon government. After a Vietcong attack on the U.S. base at Pleiku in 1965, Johnson authorized Operation Rolling Thunder, a prolonged air attack using B-52 bombers against targets in North Vietnam. In April, the president decided to use U.S. combat troops for the first time to fight the Vietcong. By the end of 1965, over 184,000 U.S. troops were in Vietnam, and most were engaged in a combat role. Johnson continued a step-by-step escalation of U.S. involvement in the war. Hoping

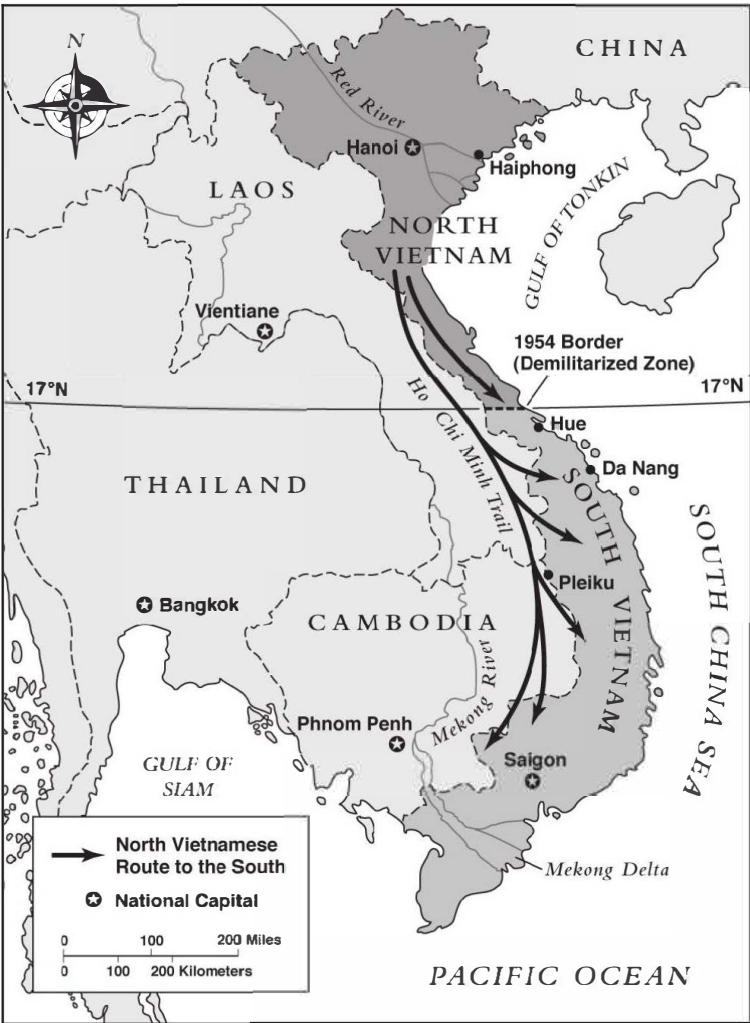


to win a war of attrition, American generals used search-and-destroy tactics, which only further alienated the peasants. By the end of 1967, the United States had over 485,000 troops in Vietnam (the peak was 540,000 in March 1969), and 16,000 Americans had already died in the conflict. Nevertheless, General William Westmoreland, commander of the U.S. forces in Vietnam, assured the American public that he could see “light at the end of the tunnel.”

**Controversy**

Misinformation from military and civilian leaders combined with Johnson’s reluctance to speak frankly with the American people about the scope and the costs of the war created what the media called a *credibility gap*. Johnson always hoped that a little more military pressure would bring the North Vietnamese to the peace table. The most damaging knowledge gap, however, may have been within the inner circles of government. Years later, Robert McNamara in his memoirs concluded that the leaders in Washington had failed to understand both the enemy and the nature of the war.

THE VIETNAM WAR



**Hawks versus Doves** The supporters of the war, the “hawks,” believed that the war was an act of Soviet-backed Communist aggression against South Vietnam and that it was part of a master plan to conquer all of Southeast Asia. The opponents of the war, the “doves,” viewed the conflict as a civil war fought by Vietnamese nationalists and some Communists who wanted to unite their country by overthrowing a corrupt Saigon government.

Some Americans opposed the war because of its costs in lives and money. They believed the billions spent in Vietnam could be better spent on the problems of the cities and the poor in the United States. By far the greatest opposition came from students on college campuses who, after graduation, would become eligible to be drafted into the military and shipped off to Vietnam. In November 1967, the antiwar movement was given a political leader when scholarly Senator Eugene F. McCarthy of Minnesota became the first antiwar advocate to challenge Johnson for the 1968 Democratic presidential nomination.

**Tet Offensive** On the occasion of their Lunar New Year (Tet) in January 1968, the Vietcong launched an all-out surprise attack on almost every provincial capital and American base in South Vietnam. Although the attack took a fearful toll in the cities, the U.S. military counterattacked, inflicted much heavier losses on the Vietcong, and recovered the lost territory. Even so, in political terms, the American military victory proved irrelevant to the way the Tet Offensive was interpreted at home. The destruction viewed by millions on the TV news appeared as a colossal setback for Johnson’s Vietnam policy. Thus, for the Vietcong and North Vietnamese, Tet was a tremendous political victory in demoralizing the American public. In the New Hampshire primary in February, the antiwar McCarthy took 42 percent of the vote against Johnson.

**LBJ Ends Escalation** The Joint Chiefs of Staff responded to Tet by requesting 200,000 more troops to win the war. By this time, however, the group of experienced Cold War diplomats who advised Johnson had turned against further escalation of the war. On March 31, 1968, President Johnson went on television and told the American people that he would limit the bombing of North Vietnam and negotiate peace. He then surprised everyone by announcing that he would not run again for president.

In May 1968, peace talks between North Vietnam, South Vietnam, and the United States started in Paris, but they were quickly deadlocked over minor issues. The war continued, and tens of thousands more died. But the escalation of the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam had stopped, and under the next administration it would be reversed.

## **Coming Apart at Home, 1968**

Few years in U.S. history were as troubled or violent as 1968. The Tet offensive and the withdrawal of Johnson from the presidential race were followed by the senseless murder of Martin Luther King Jr. and destructive riots in cities across the country. As the year unfolded, Americans wondered if their nation was coming apart from internal conflicts over the war issue, the race issue, and the generation gap between the baby boomers and their parents.

## ***Second Kennedy Assassination***

In 1964, Kennedy's younger brother, Robert Kennedy, had become a senator from New York. Four years later, he decided to enter the presidential race after McCarthy's strong showing in New Hampshire. Bobby Kennedy was more effective than McCarthy in mobilizing the traditional Democratic blue-collar and minority vote. On June 5, 1968, he won a major victory in California's primary, but immediately after his victory speech, he was shot and killed by a young Arab nationalist who opposed Kennedy's support for Israel.

## ***The Election of 1968***

After Robert Kennedy's death, the election of 1968 turned into a three-way race between two conservatives—George Wallace and Richard Nixon— and one liberal, Vice President Hubert Humphrey.

**Democratic Convention at Chicago** When the Democrats met in Chicago for their party convention, it was clear that Hubert Humphrey had enough delegates to win the nomination. As vice president, he had loyally supported Johnson's domestic and foreign policies. He controlled the convention, but the antiwar demonstrators were determined to control the streets. Chicago's mayor Richard Daley had the police out in mass, and the resulting violence went out on television across the country as a "police riot." Humphrey left the convention as the nominee of a badly divided Democratic party, and early polls showed he was a clear underdog in a nation sick of disorder and protest.

**White Backlash and George Wallace** The growing hostility of many whites to federal desegregation, antiwar protests, and race riots was tapped by Governor George Wallace of Alabama. Wallace was the first politician of late-20th-century America to marshal the general resentment against the Washington establishment ("pointy-head liberals," as he called them) and the two-party system. He ran for president as the self-nominated candidate of the American Independent party, hoping to win enough electoral votes to throw the election into the House of Representatives.

**Return of Richard Nixon** Many observers thought Richard Nixon's political career had ended in 1962 after his unsuccessful run for governor of California. In 1968, however, a new, more confident and less negative Nixon announced his candidacy and soon became the front-runner in the Republican primaries. The favorite of the party regulars, he had little trouble securing his nomination at the Republican convention. For his running mate, he selected Governor Spiro Agnew of Maryland, whose rhetoric was similar to that of George Wallace. Nixon was a "hawk" on the Vietnam War and ran on the slogans of "peace with honor" and "law and order."

**Results** Wallace and Nixon started strong, but the Democrats began to catch up, especially in northern urban centers, as Humphrey preached to the faithful of the old New Deal coalition. On election night, Nixon defeated Humphrey by a very close popular vote but took a substantial majority of the electoral vote (301 to 191), ending any threat that the three-candidate election would end up in the House of Representatives.



The significance of the 1968 election is clear in the combined total of Nixon's and Wallace's popular vote of almost 57 percent. Apparently, most Americans wanted a time out to heal the wounds inflicted on the national psyche by the upheavals of the 1960s. Supporters of Nixon and Wallace had had enough of protest, violence, permissiveness, the counterculture, drugs, and federal intervention in social institutions. Elections in the 1970s and 1980s would confirm that the tide was turning against New Deal liberalism in favor of the conservatives.

#### **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: WHAT ARE THE LESSONS OF VIETNAM?**

The U.S. war in Vietnam had been long and deadly. Marked by failures in both political and military leadership, the war initiated a period of widespread distrust of the government. What went wrong? Critics of the war argued that the United States failed in Vietnam because neither the government nor the military understood the nature of the war. Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon viewed the conflict strictly in Cold War terms as an act of aggression by the Communist "monolith" to take over another part of the world, instead of a civil war in which a former colony was trying to gain its independence from Western colonialism. Former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, in his book *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (1995), laments that members of the Johnson administration lacked Asian experts to advise them on the formulation of Vietnam policy.

In contrast, General William Westmoreland and other military leaders of the era blamed the civilian government for placing restrictions on the conduct of the war that prevented the military from winning it. In their view, the war could have been won if only the U.S. military had been permitted to take the offensive and bring the war to a swift conclusion. The generals blamed the media for turning the American people against the war. Westmoreland and others argued that the telecasts of the Tet Offensive forced a change in the conduct of the war, just at the point that the U.S. military was beginning to win it.

Many observers have attempted to extract lessons from Vietnam, hoping that the mistakes of the past can be avoided in the future. To many critics of the war, it appeared that the most important mistake was attempting to impose an unsatisfactory regime on a country and that the United States should not go into a war if no vital national interests are at stake. Many critics concluded that a president and Congress should not lead the nation into future war unless they are confident that they can rally and sustain the support of the American people behind the effort over time.

## KEY TERMS BY THEME

### **Kennedy: Domestic Issues (POL)**

Election of 1960  
John F. Kennedy  
New Frontier  
Robert Kennedy  
Jacqueline Kennedy  
race to the moon  
assassination in Dallas  
Warren Commission

### **Kennedy: Foreign Policy (WOR)**

Peace Corps  
Alliance for Progress  
Trade Expansion Act (1962)  
Bay of Pigs  
Berlin Wall  
Cuban missile crisis (1962)  
flexible response  
Nuclear Test Ban Treaty

### **Johnson: Domestic Programs (POL, WXT)**

Lyndon Johnson  
Great Society  
War on Poverty  
Michael Harrington, *The Other America*  
Election of 1964  
Barry Goldwater  
Medicare; Medicaid  
Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965)  
Immigrant Act (1965)  
National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities  
DOT and HUD  
Ralph Nader, *Unsafe at Any Speed*  
Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*

Lady Bird Johnson  
Civil Rights Act of 1964  
Equal Employment Opportunity Commission  
24th Amendment  
Voting Rights Act of 1965

### **Civil Rights and Black Power (NAT, POL)**

James Meredith  
George Wallace  
Martin Luther King Jr.  
March on Washington (1963)  
"I Have a Dream" speech  
March to Montgomery  
Black Muslims  
Malcolm X  
Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee  
Congress of Racial Equality  
Stokely Carmichael  
Black Panthers  
Watts riots, race riots  
de facto segregation  
Kerner Commission  
King assassination (1968)

### **Rights of Americans (POL)**

Warren Court  
*Mapp v. Ohio*  
*Gideon v. Wainwright*  
*Escobedo v. Illinois*  
*Miranda v. Arizona*  
reapportionment  
*Baker v. Carr*  
"one man, one vote"  
*Yates v. United States*  
separation of church and state

*Engel v. Vitale*  
*Griswold v. Connecticut*  
privacy and contraceptives

### **Social Conflict (NAT, CUL)**

Students for a Democratic Society  
New Left  
Weathermen  
counterculture  
Woodstock  
Alfred Kinsey  
sexual revolution  
women's movement  
Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*  
National Organization for Women  
Equal Pay Act (1963)  
Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)

### **Vietnam War to 1969 (WOR)**

military "advisers"  
fall of Diem  
Tonkin Gulf Resolution  
escalation of troops  
General Westmoreland  
credibility gap  
Tet Offensive  
hawks and doves

### **1968 Election (POL)**

LBJ withdraws  
Eugene McCarthy  
Robert Kennedy  
RFK assassination  
Hubert Humphrey  
Chicago convention  
white backlash  
George Wallace  
Richard Nixon