

1960's

Major Themes:

The Cold War-- Vietnam
Modern Civil Rights
Economy and Society

Presidencies:

John F. Kennedy (D) – 1961 - 63
Lyndon B. Johnson (D) – 1963 - 69
Richard Nixon (R) – 1969 - 74

Overview:

Let's keep going with Civil Rights first. 1960 saw the election of America's first, and only, Catholic President, John F. Kennedy. Young, smart, attractive, he represented a new direction for America and Americans. It had been close. The race against Richard Nixon, who had been Eisenhower's Vice President, some historians argue, came down to a phone call from JFK to Coretta Scott King, MLK's wife, promising to work for civil rights if elected. This brought in the small, but crucial black vote, contributing to the idea that JFK "won the election with a phone call."

In 1960, sit-ins started in Greensboro, North Carolina lunch counters – civil disobedience designed to force integration. They spread across the South, and especially to Nashville, where the sit-ins were launched by students from the local college. Besides being ultimately successful, the students then organized their own civil rights group, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or "Snick". BY 1963, Martin Luther King had been arrested a number of times, usually for flimsy charges, just designed to break up his movement. He wrote one of the most influential pieces of writing ever in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" which offered a compelling moral and political justification for his civil rights tactics.

But nonviolence was not the only popular tactic in the civil rights movement. Malcolm X became a popular revolutionary in the 1960's, calling for civil rights "by any means necessary", including armed conflict. He became the leader of the Nation of Islam, a group of black Muslims in the US who believed that the latest Prophet sent by God was in fact Elijah Mohammed, a black man living in the South at the time who, instead of integration, advocated a separate black nation within the South. It was an idea that never went anywhere, but it's important to remember that there were many other parts to the civil rights movement than just Martin Luther King. The Black Power movement, a social idea that blacks should encourage other blacks to be proud of their identity, and to help other members of the race to overcome discrimination and poverty. The symbol of the movement was the raised fist, and was a popular gesture between blacks in the US, and between black soldiers fighting in Vietnam. The Black Panthers were something different altogether. Sort of a cross between Malcolm X's philosophy and Black Power, whereby blacks armed themselves, patrolled their own LA neighborhoods instead of white policemen, and prepared for a possible race war. Many of their most violent groups were arrested by the FBI and sentenced to lengthy prison terms.

LBJ, Kennedy's successor, was much more effective at civil rights reform. In 1964, groups of college students, white and black, from the north, went into states like Mississippi and registered blacks to vote, helping them get around the maze of legal restrictions against them. Registration in Mississippi among blacks went from 5% to 25% in a single summer. That same year, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination in housing against African-Americans. The year following, the Voting Rights Act was passed, which put serious

pressure on southern states to allow blacks into the voting and election process. It had only taken 100 years since the 15th amendment had first been passed for them to obtain that right.

The Civil rights movement ended soon after, as most of their goals had been achieved, but the exclamation point that finished it was the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968.

The 1960's were so important in our history because *so much* was happening, and all at the same time. Kennedy's presidency became dominated by the Cold War, as the space race was already taking place. He oversaw the launch of the first American into space, Alan Shepherd, and also promised the American public that we would go to the moon – ahead of the Soviets. In 1961, he inherited Eisenhower's plans for an invasion of Cuba, and gave it the green light at the Bay of Pigs. It failed miserably, and of course, he was blamed. The Soviet Union, led by Nikita Khrushchev, approached Castro with the idea of stationing nuclear missiles there for "protection". Castro resisted at first, but eventually said OK. When the US learned that the missiles were already in Cuba, Kennedy was forced to take decisive action. In 13 days during October 1962, we placed a naval blockade around Cuba, and gave an ultimatum to the Soviets: take the missiles out of Cuba or we would take them out militarily. It was the closest we ever came to World War III, and it *was* close. It scared everyone so much, including the Soviets, that in exchange for them removing the missiles, we promised to leave Castro alone, and installed a hotline telephone between the two leaders, so there would be no accidental wars, and we could always talk to each other in times of conflict.

The Vietnam conflict was already heating up during Kennedy's time, as he sent military aid and advisors to the South Vietnamese government. LBJ, on the other hand, used the Tonkin Gulf Incident to justify asking Congress for a free hand to deal with North Vietnamese aggression. He got what he wanted, as the Tonkin Gulf Resolution passed 504 – 2, with Senators Morse and Fulbright voicing the only real opposition. This began a period of "escalation" for the next four years, as we sent more and more American troops to South Vietnam. By 1968, there would be more than a half million. Americans supported the war during that time, believing that if we did not fight communists in Southeast Asia, they would soon be on the shores of America. Overly paranoid, perhaps, but there it was. Keep in mind that Vietnam was a very different kind of war – we had Cold War technology against a primitive (at least at first) enemy. Helicopters, precision bombs, advanced fighters and radar. This gave us our confidence on how we could win Vietnam. We couldn't win for the very same reasons the British could not win the Revolutionary War in America two hundred years before: we had long supply lines, the war was expensive, we were using a draftee army while the Vietcong had all volunteers, we didn't know the terrain, and the enemy used hit and run guerrilla tactics. We very rarely lost a battle, but couldn't seem to win the war.

In 1968, General Westmoreland, our commander in Vietnam, told Americans that enemy activity had dropped off, that we were winning, that we could see "the light at the end of the tunnel." This turned out to be false, as the Vietcong were preparing for an all out attack on nearly every US base and installation in South Vietnam. This was called the Tet Offensive. Militarily, it was a huge victory for the US. The VC came out of the jungle and into the open, into the cities, where we could concentrate superior firepower. They were annihilated. But the VC had won the war on TV. Having just been told we were winning, Americans now saw on their evening news programs that the VC were occupying the US embassy right in the middle of Saigon. At this point, public opinion turned against the war for the first time. LBJ decided that he would not run again in November for President. Robert Kennedy, JFK's younger brother, jumped in the race and became the quick favorite to win, but he was then assassinated. More on that election later.

Johnson had other goals as President besides Civil Rights and Vietnam. He also wanted to end poverty in the US. A tough goal, to be sure, but he gave it a real shot. He envisioned a “Great Society”, and passed a number of programs he thought would help create one. The War on Poverty included what we would today call welfare, and Food Stamps – direct payments to the poorest Americans to help them survive day to day living. Contrast this with FDR’s New Deal programs, which gave people jobs and allowed them to work their way through poverty. Different idea with similar results. Less people were in poverty in the 1960’s, after the Great Society programs were put into place, but they only stayed out of poverty as long as the government kept sending out money. In some cases, it even made people dependent on the government for survival. Welfare today is a shadow of what it was under LBJ. He also created VISTA – Volunteers in Service to America, sort of a domestic Peace Corps, that did everything from teach in poor neighborhoods to painting over graffiti to organizing basketball tournaments. These were great ideas, noble ideas, and expensive ideas. Then came the question – how do we pay for both “guns and butter”? How to pay for the Cold War, Vietnam, the Space Race, and the Great Society all at once? We could raise taxes. And we did. We could borrow more money. And we did. Neither were popular or even wise at the time. But the economy was booming in the 1960’s just as the 1950’s. More Americans, especially women, went to work. Household income went up, home ownership increased. We consumed more material goods than ever before. That did not prevent some Americans from being dissatisfied with our society, thus, the Counterculture.

The Counterculture was more than hippies. It was a true revolution against traditional expectations. The World War II/Depression generation was content to live in a country where there was jobs and relative peace and prosperity. The Baby Boom generation they gave birth to didn’t buy into the idea that we had arrived in the promised land just yet. There were challenges to the old belief system on a number of levels: education, women’s rights, civil rights, religion, the Cold War and Vietnam just to name a few. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) formed in the early 1960’s, issuing the influential Port Huron Statement about the need for educational reform. They wanted elective classes, fewer classes such as Latin or Greek, an end to dress codes, the introduction of co-ed dorms and more college majors to choose from. They achieved most of these things, which we still enjoy today in our schools. The birth control pill was invented in 1961, and was truly revolutionary. It’s not as if this caused a sexual revolution, but it was a major cause of the women’s rights movement. What had, for centuries, prevented women from either getting a higher education or entering politics, was the traditional gender expectations that they remain in the home to raise children and cook and clean for their husbands. The idea that they could now reliably plan how many children to have, and when to have them, changed all of this. More women entered the work force. More women went to college. More women started asking why they weren’t given equal pay for doing the same jobs as men. And when black civil rights was center stage, women felt left out of the reforms. Betty Friedan, in the late 1960’s, formed the National Organization for Women (NOW), published *The Feminine Mystique*, which echoed many women’s dissatisfaction with staying in the home, and pushed for the adoption of the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution. Women’s rights as an idea was still unpopular with men, but was gaining support. The sexual revolution came about not because of the pill, but because women in general rebelled against the expectations and restrictions society had of them. Add to this the more hippy idea of “free love” – sex outside of marriage and outside of love, and Americans in general were more promiscuous during this time period.

Finally! The last part of the 1960’s to know about. In 1968, Richard Nixon, a Republican, ran against Hubert Humphrey, the only geek the Democrats could find after losing their top two choices. In addition, Alabama Governor George Wallace ran as a segregationist independent. Nixon would win the election, but Wallace would carry the South, proving that many Americans

still didn't buy into the new civil rights. Nixon had promised to get us out of Vietnam, while still winning the war. To do this, he proposed "Vietnamization" – training a Vietnamese Army that could defend itself so we didn't have to. At the same time, Nixon ordered increased bombing of North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, and created an anti-war movement that was getting stronger all the time. Protests grew in number and strength. People openly burned draft cards, though the vast majority of Americans who were called, went into the military and served. Somewhere in the middle of this, we landed on the moon, the world's first live broadcast. In 1970, Nixon ordered the invasion of Cambodia to destroy hiding places of the Vietcong across the border from Vietnam. This invasion triggered protests across the country, especially on college campuses like Kent State University in Ohio, where four students were shot dead by the National Guard units that had been called. The anti-war movement treated this as their Boston Massacre, and the 1970's would not be any calmer or more unified than the 60's had been.

That's one last thing to remember about the 1960's. The effect of all of these things happening simultaneously, was to divide American society. Counterculture, traditional. Pro-Vietnam War, anti-War. Pro women's or civil rights, anti-women's rights. Sexual revolution, religious traditional backlash. Rock and roll and country. OK, just kidding about that last one.