
**NEW FRONTIERS:**

**KENNEDY AND JOHNSON**

For those who considered the social and political climate of the 1950s dull, the following decade would provide a striking contrast. The 1960s were years of extraordinary social turbulence and innovation in public affairs—as well as sudden tragedy and trauma. Many social ills that had been festering for decades suddenly forced their way onto the national agenda. At the same time, the deeply entrenched assumptions of Cold War ideology led the country into the longest, most controversial, and least successful war in the nation's history.

**The New Frontier**

**KENNEDY VS. NIXON** In 1960, however, few sensed such dramatic change on the horizon. The presidential election of that year pitted two candidates—Richard M. Nixon and John F. Kennedy—who seemed to symbolize the unadventurous politics of the 1950s. Though better known than Kennedy because of his eight years as Eisenhower's vice-president, Nixon had also developed the reputation of a cunning chameleon, the "Tricky Dick" who concealed his duplicity behind a series of masks. "Nixon doesn't know who he is," Kennedy told an aide, "and so each time he makes a speech he has to decide which Nixon he is, and that will be very exhausting."

But Nixon could not be so easily dismissed. He possessed a shrewd intelligence and a compulsive love for politics; the more combative the better. His worst flaw was a callous disregard for the rules of political combat, a trait he displayed from his first campaign to his last. Born in

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suburban Los Angeles in 1913, he grew up amid a working-class Quaker family struggling to make ends meet. Acquaintances remembered the young Richard Nixon as a quiet, introverted, diligent fellow. "He wasn't a little boy that you wanted to pick up and hug," recalled one family friend.

In 1946, having completed law school and a wartime stint in the navy, Richard Nixon jumped into the political arena as a Republican, and, with the help of a powerful group of conservative southern California business men, he unseated a popular congressman. Nixon arrived in Washington eager to reverse the tide of New Deal liberalism. "I was elected to smash the labor bosses," he explained. Four years later he won election to the Senate. In his campaigns, Nixon unleashed scurrilous personal attacks on his opponents, employing half-truths, lies, and rumors, and he shrewdly manipulated and led the growing anti-Communist hysteria. Yet Nixon became both a respected and effective member of Congress, and by 1950 he was the most respected Republican speaker in the country. The reward for his rapid rise to political stardom was the vice-presidential nomination in 1952, which led to successive terms as the highly visible partner of the popular Eisenhower.

In comparison to his Republican opponent, Kennedy was inexperienced. Despite an abundance of assets, including a record of heroism in World War II, a glamorous young wife, a bright, agile mind and Harvard education, a rich, powerful family, a handsome face, movie-star charisma, and robust outlook, the forty-three-year-old Kennedy had not distinguished himself in the House and Senate. Indeed, his political rise owed not so much to his abilities or accomplishments as to the effective public relations campaign engineered by his ambitious father.

Joseph Kennedy was a self-made tycoon, the grandson of poor Irish Catholic immigrants. Early on he developed a ferocious determination to achieve the American Dream and in the process assuaged prevailing stereotypes of the Irish. A ruthless opportunist, he made millions on Wall Street in the twenties, gained control of much of the Hollywood film industry in the thirties, and finessed from President Franklin Roosevelt an appointment as ambassador to Great Britain. Ambassador Kennedy soon developed a consuming ambition to see one of his sons elected president. When the eldest boy, Joseph Jr., was killed in the war, the mantle of paternal expectation fell on John's shoulders. When John Kennedy decided to run for his first office, his father declared: "We're going to sell him like soap flakes."

Kennedy subsequently suffered from criticism that there was more image to him than substance. And there was some truth to the charge. Although he won a Pulitzer Prize for Profiles in Courage (1956), a book (ghostwritten by an aide) about past political leaders who had "made the tough decisions," Kennedy, claimed Washington critics, had shown more profile than courage during the McCarthy era of the early 1950s, and he had a weak record on civil rights. Eleanor Roosevelt declined to endorse Kennedy in 1960, noting that presidential authority should not be vested in "someone who understands what courage is and admires it, but has not quite the independence to have it."

During his campaign for the Democratic nomination, Kennedy had shown that he had the energy to match his grace and ambition, even though he actually lived with intense pain all his adult life. Kennedy suffered from serious spinal problems, Addison's disease (a debilitating disorder of the adrenal glands), recurrent blood disorders, venereal disease, and fierce fevers. He took medicine daily, sometimes hourly. But like Franklin Roosevelt, he and his aides and family members successfully masked such physical ailments from the public.

As the first Catholic to run for the presidency since Al Smith, he strove to dispel the impression that his religion was a major political liability. "If the nomination ever goes into a back room," he told a friend, "my name will never emerge."

By the time of the convention in 1960, Kennedy had traveled over 65,000 miles, visited twenty-five states, and made over 350 speeches. He knocked Hubert Humphrey, the buoyant liberal senator from Minnesota, out of the race in the West Virginia primary. In his acceptance speech, Kennedy found the stirring, muscular rhetoric that would stamp the rest of his campaign and his presidency: "We stand today on the edge of a New Frontier—the frontier of unknown opportunities and perils—a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats." Kennedy and his staff quite consciously fastened upon the frontier metaphor as the label for their domestic program. As an avid student of American history himself, Kennedy knew that the frontier image possessed a special resonance for the American people. Americans had always been adventurers, eager to conquer and exploit new frontiers, and Kennedy promised to use his administration to continue the process.

Three events shaped the campaign that fall. First, in a speech before the Houston Ministerial Association in 1960, Kennedy directly confronted the political implications of his Catholicism. In America, he told the Protestant clergy, "the separation of church and state is absolute," and "no Catholic prelate would tell the President—should he be a Catholic—how to act and no Protestant minister should tell his parishioners for whom to vote." The religious question thereafter drew little public attention; Kennedy's cancror had neutralized it.

Second, Nixon violated one of the cardinal rules of politics when he agreed to debate his less prominent opponent on television. During the first of four debates, few significant policy differences surfaced, allowing viewers to shape their opinions more on matters of style. Some 70 million people watched the first-ever television debate, and they saw an
called the judge handling King's case, who also happened to be a close friend of the Georgia governor, aler ting him "that if he was a decent American, he would let King out of jail by sundown. I called him because it made me so damned angry to think of that bastard sentencing a citizen to four months of hard labor for a minor traffic offense and screwing up my brother's campaign and making our country look ridiculous before the world." The call had its intended effect. King was soon released on bail, and the Kennedy campaign seized full advantage of the outcome, distributing some 2 million pamphlets in black neighborhoods extolling Kennedy's efforts on behalf of Dr. King.

When the votes were counted, Kennedy and his running mate, Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas, had won the closest presidential election since 1888. The winning margin was only 118,574 votes out of 88 million cast. Kennedy's wide lead in the electoral vote, 303 to 219, belied the paper thin margin in several key states, especially Illinois, where Chicago mayor Richard Daley's Democratic machine appeared to have lived up to its legendary campaign motto: "In Chicago we tell our people to vote early and to vote often." Nixon had in fact carried more states than Kennedy, sweeping most of the West, and holding four of the six southern states Eisenhower had carried in 1956. Kennedy's majority was built out of victories in southern New England, the populous Middle Atlantic states, and key states in the South where black voters provided the critical margin of victory. Yet ominous rumblings of discontent appeared
in the once-solid Democratic South, as all eight of Mississippi's electors and six of Alabama's eleven defied the national ticket and voted for Virginia senator Harry Byrd, the arch-segregationist.

THE NEW ADMINISTRATION  Kennedy was the youngest person ever elected president, and his cabinet appointments put an accent on youth and "Eastern Establishment" figures. As a self-described "idealistic without illusions," he was determined to attract the "best and the brightest" minds available, individuals who would inject a tough, pragmatic, and vigorous outlook into governmental affairs. Alllai Stevenson was favored by liberal Democrats for secretary of state, but Kennedy chose Dean Rusk, a career diplomat who then headed the Rockefeller Foundation. Stevenson received the relatively minor post of ambassador to the United Nations. Robert S. McNamara, one of the "whiz kids" who had reorganized the Ford Motor Company with his "systems-analysis" techniques, was asked to bring his managerial magic to bear on the Department of Defense. C. Douglas Dillon, a banker and a Republican, was made secretary of the treasury in an effort to reassure conservative business owners. When critics attacked the appointment of Kennedy's thirty-five-year-old brother, Robert, as attorney-general, the president quipped, "I don't see what's wrong with giving Bobby a little experience before he goes into law practice." McGeorge Bundy, whom Kennedy called "the second smartest man I know," was made special assistant for national security affairs, lending additional credence to the impression that foreign policy would remain under tight White House control.

The inaugural ceremonies set the tone of elegance and youthful vigor that would come to be called the "Kennedy style." The glittering atmosphere of snow-clad Washington seemed to symbolize fresh promise. After Robert Frost paid tribute to the administration in verse, Kennedy dazzled listeners with uplifting rhetoric. "Let the word go forth from this time and place," he proclaimed, "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. And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country." Spines tingled at the time; Kennedy, one journalist wrote, was the first president to be a Prince Charming.

THE KENNEDY RECORD  But for all of his idealistic and energetic rhetoric, Kennedy had a difficult time launching his New Frontier domestic program. Elected by a razor-thin margin, he enjoyed no popular mandate. Nor did he show much skill in shepherding legislation through Congress. Moreover, Congress, although overwhelmingly Democratic, remained in the grip of a conservative southern coalition that blocked Kennedy's efforts to increase federal aid to education, provide health insurance for the aged, and create a new Department of Urban Affairs. The Senate killed his initiatives on behalf of unemployed youth, migrant workers, and mass transit. When Kennedy finally came around to the advice of his Keynesian advisers in 1963 and submitted a drastic tax cut of $13.6 billion, Congress blocked that as well.

Administration proposals, nevertheless, did win some notable victories in Congress. Those involving defense and foreign policy generally won favor; indeed, defense appropriations exceeded administration requests. On foreign aid there were some cuts, but Congress readily approved broad "Alliance for Progress" programs to help Latin America, and the celebrated Peace Corps, created in 1961 to supply volunteers to provide educational and technical services abroad. Kennedy's greatest legislative accomplishment may have been the Trade Expansion Act of 1962, which eventually led to tariff cuts averaging 35 percent between the United States and the European Common Market.

In the field of domestic social legislation, the administration did score a few victories. They included a new Housing Act, which earmarked nearly $5 billion for urban renewal over four years, a raise in the minimum wage from $1 to $1.25 and its extension to more than 3 million additional workers, the Area Redevelopment Act of 1961, which provided nearly $400 million in loans and grants to "distressed areas," an increase in Social Security benefits, and additional funds for sewage treatment plants. Kennedy also won support for an accelerated space program with the goal of landing on the moon before the end of the decade.

CIVIL RIGHTS  The most important development in American domestic life during the Kennedy years occurred in the area of civil rights. Kennedy entered the White House reluctant to challenge conservative
In April 1960 the student participants, black and white, formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which worked with King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to broaden the movement. The sit-ins at restaurants became “kneel-ins” at churches and “wade-ins” at segregated public pools. Everywhere the protesters refused to retaliate, even when struck with clubs or poked with cattle prods. The conservative white editor of the Richmond News Leader conceded his admiration for their courage:

Here were the colored students, in coats, white shirts, ties, and one of them was reading Coretta, and one was taking notes from a biology text. And here, on the sidewalk, was a gang of white boys come to heckle, a ragtail rattle, slack-jawed, black-jacketed, grinning fit to kill, and some of them, God save the mark, were waving the proud and honored flag of the Southern States in the last war fought by gentlemen.

Several of the black demonstrators paid for such courage and commitment with their lives.

In 1961 the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) sent a group of black and white “freedom riders” on buses to test a federal court ruling that had banned segregation on buses and trains and in terminals. In Alabama mobs attacked the travelers, burned one of the buses, and assaulted Justice Department observers, but the demonstrators persisted and drew national attention, generating new respect and support for their cause.

Then in 1962 Governor Ross Barnett of Mississippi, who believed that God made the Negro “different to punish him,” defied a court order and refused to allow James H. Meredith, a black student, to enroll at the University of Mississippi. Attorney-General Robert Kennedy thereupon dispatched federal marshals to enforce the law. When the marshals were assaulted by a white mob, federal troops had to intervene, but only after two deaths and many injuries. Meredith was finally registered at “Ole Miss” a few days later.

Everywhere it seemed black activists and white supporters were challenging deeply entrenched patterns of segregation and prejudice. In April 1963 Martin Luther King launched a series of nonviolent demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama, where Police Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor served as the perfect foil for King’s tactic of nonviolent civil disobedience. Connor used attack dogs, tear gas, electric cattle prods, and fire hoses on the protesters while millions of outraged Americans watched the confrontations on television.

King, who was arrested and jailed during the demonstrations, took the opportunity to write his “Letter from Birmingham City Jail,” a stirring defense of the nonviolent strategy that became a classic of the civil-
Throughout the Deep South, traditionalists remained steadfast. In the fall of 1963, Governor George Wallace dramatically stood in the doorway of a building at the University of Alabama to block the enrollment of several black students, but he stepped aside in the face of insistent federal marshals. That night President Kennedy spoke eloquently of the moral issue facing the nation: “If an American, because his skin is black, cannot enjoy the full and free life which all of us want, then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place? Who among us would be content with the counsel of patience and delay?” Later the same night, NAACP official Medgar Evers was shot to death as he returned home in Jackson, Mississippi.

The high point of the integrationist phase of the civil-rights movement occurred on August 28, 1963, when over 200,000 blacks and whites marched down the Mall in Washington, D.C., toward the Lincoln Memorial singing “We Shall Overcome.” The March on Washington was the largest civil-rights demonstration in American history. Standing in front of Lincoln’s statue, King delivered one of the memorable public speeches of the century:

“I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’

Martin Luther King, Jr. (second from left), and other civil-rights leaders at the head of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedoms, August 28, 1963.
I have a dream that one day… the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood.

That the time for such racial harmony had not yet arrived, however, became clear a little over two weeks later when a bomb exploded in a Birmingham church, killing four black girls who had arrived early for Sunday school. Yet King’s dream—shared and promoted by thousands of other activists—survived. The intransigence and violence that civil rights workers encountered won converts to their cause all across the country.

**THE WARREN COURT** Under Chief Justice Earl Warren, the Supreme Court continued to be a decisive influence on American domestic life during the 1960s. The Court’s decisions on civil liberties proved as controversial as its earlier decisions on civil rights. In 1962 the Court had ruled that a school prayer adopted by the New York State Board of Regents violated the constitutional prohibition against an established religion. In *Gideon v. Wainwright* (1963) the Court required that every felony defendant be provided a lawyer regardless of the defendant’s ability to pay. In 1964 the Court ruled in *Escobedo v. Illinois* that a person accused of a crime must also be allowed to consult a lawyer before being interrogated by police. Two years later, in *Miranda v. Arizona*, the Court issued perhaps its most bitterly criticized ruling when it ordered that an accused person in police custody must be informed of certain basic rights: the right to remain silent; the right to know that anything said can be used against the individual in court; and the right to have a defense attorney present during interrogation. In addition, the Court established rules for police to follow in informing suspects of their legal rights before questioning could begin.

**FOREIGN FRONTIERS**

**EARLY SETBACKS** Kennedy’s record in foreign relations, like that in domestic affairs, was mixed, but more spectacularly so. Although he had made the existence of a “missile gap” a major part of his campaign, he discovered upon taking office that there was no “missile gap”—the United States remained far ahead of the Soviets in nuclear weaponry. Kennedy also discovered that there was in the works a CIA operation training 1,500 anti-Castro Cubans for an invasion of their homeland. The Joint Chiefs of Staff assured Kennedy that the plan was feasible in theory; diplomatic advisers predicted that the invasion would inspire Cubans on the island to rebel against Castro.

In retrospect, it is clear that the scheme, poorly planned and poorly executed, had about as much chance of succeeding as John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry a little over a century earlier. When the invasion force landed at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba on April 19, 1961, it was brutally subdued in three days and 1,200 men were captured. A *New York Times* columnist lamented that the United States “looked like fools to our friends, rascals to our enemies, and incompetents to the rest.” It was hardly an auspicious way for the new president to demonstrate his mastery of foreign policy. “Victory has a thousand fathers,” Kennedy said sadly, “but defeat is an orphan.”

Two months after the Bay of Pigs debacle Kennedy met Soviet premier Khrushchev in Vienna, Austria. It was a tense confrontation during which Khrushchev browbeat the inexperienced Kennedy and threatened to limit Western access to Berlin, the divided city located deep within communist East Germany. Kennedy was shaken by the aggressive Soviet stand, but returned home determined to demonstrate American resolve. He called up reserve and National Guard units. The Soviets responded by throwing up the Berlin Wall, begun with barbed wire and eventually solidified into a cinder-block barrier that cut off movement between East and West Berlin. Although no shooting incident triggered an accidental war, the Berlin Wall plugged the most accessible escape hatch for East Germans, showed Soviet willingness to challenge American resolve in Europe, and became another intractable barrier to the opening of new frontiers.

**THE MISSILE CRISIS** A year later Khrushchev posed another challenge, this time ninety miles off the coast of Florida. Kennedy’s unwillingness to commit the forces necessary to overthrow Castro and his acquiescence to the erection of the Berlin Wall seemed to signify a failure of will, and the Russians apparently reasoned that they could install missiles in Cuba with relative impunity. Their motives were to protect Cuba from another American-backed invasion, which Castro believed to be imminent, and to redress the strategic imbalance caused by the presence of American missiles in Turkey aimed at the Soviet Union.

American officials feared that Russian missiles in Cuba would come from a direction not covered by radar systems and arrive too quickly for warning. More important to Kennedy was the psychological effect of American acquiescence to a Soviet presence on its doorstep. This might weaken the credibility of the American deterrent for Europeans and demoralize anti-Castro elements in Latin America. At the same time, the installation of missiles served Khrushchev’s purpose of demonstrating his toughness to both Chinese and Russian critics of his earlier advocacy of peaceful coexistence. But he misjudged the American response.

On October 14, 1962, American intelligence experts discovered from photographs made on high-altitude U-2 flights that Russian missile sites
were under construction in Cuba. From the beginning the administration decided that they had to be removed; the only question was how. In a series of secret meetings the Executive Committee of the National Security Council narrowed the options down to a choice between a "surgical" air strike and a blockade of Cuba. They opted for a blockade, which was carefully disguised by the euphemism "quarantine," since a blockade was technically an act of war. It offered the advantage of forcing the Soviets to shoot first, if it came to that, and left open the further options of stronger action. Monday, October 22, began one of the most anxious weeks in world history. On that day the president announced to members of Congress and then to the public the discovery of the missile sites in Cuba; he also announced the quarantine.

Tensions grew as Khrushchev blustered that Kennedy had pushed humankind "to the abyss of a world missile-nuclear war." Soviet ships, he declared, would ignore the quarantine. But on Wednesday, October 24, five Soviet ships, presumably with missiles aboard, stopped short of the quarantine line. Two days later an agent of the Soviet embassy privately approached an American television reporter with a proposal for an agreement: Russia would withdraw the missiles in return for a public pledge by the United States not to invade Cuba. The reporter was asked to relay the idea to the White House. Secretary of State Rusk sent back word that the administration was interested, but told the newscaster: "Remember, when you report this, that eyeball to eyeball, they blinked first."

The same evening Kennedy received two messages from Khrushchev, the first repeating the original offer and the second demanding in addition the removal of American missiles from Turkey. The two messages probably reflected divided councils in the Kremlin. Ironically, Kennedy had already ordered removal of the outmoded missiles in Turkey, but he refused now to act under the gun. Instead he followed Robert Kennedy's suggestion that he respond favorably to the first letter and ignore the second. On Sunday, October 28, Khrushchev agreed to remove the missiles and added a conciliatory invitation: "We should like to continue the exchange of views on the prohibition of atomic and thermonuclear weapons, general disarmament, and other problems relating to the relaxation of international tension."

In the aftermath of the crisis, tension between the United States and Russia quickly subsided. Kennedy, aware that Khrushchev had problems with his own hawks in the Kremlin, cautioned his associates against any gloating over the favorable settlement and began to explore in correspondence the opening provided by the premier's invitation. Several symbolic steps were taken to relax tensions; an agreement to sell Russia surplus wheat, the installation of a "hot line" telephone between Washington and Moscow to provide instant contact between the heads of government, and the removal of obsolete missiles from Turkey, Italy, and Britain. On June 10, 1963, the president announced in a speech at American University that direct discussions with the Soviets would soon begin, and he called upon the nation to reexamine its attitude toward peace, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War. Those discussions resulted in a treaty with Russia and Britain to stop nuclear testing in the atmosphere. The treaty, ratified in September 1963, did not provide for on-site inspection nor did it ban underground testing, which continued, but it promised to end the dangerous pollution of the atmosphere with radioactivity. The treaty was an important symbolic and substantive move toward détente. As Kennedy put it: "A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step."

KENNEDY AND VIETNAM In Southeast Asia events were moving toward what would become within a decade the greatest American foreign-policy calamity of the century. During John Kennedy's "thousand days" in office, the turmoil of Indochina never preoccupied the public mind for any extended period, but it dominated international diplomatic debates from the time the administration entered office.

The landlocked kingdom of Laos, along with neighboring Cambodia, had been declared neutral in the Geneva Accords of 1954, but had fallen into a complex struggle for power between the Communist Pathet Lao and the Royal Laotian Army. There matters stood when Eisenhower left office and told Kennedy: "You might have to go in there and fight it out." The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff argued in favor of a stand against the Pathet Lao, even at the cost of direct intervention. After a lengthy consideration of alternatives, Kennedy decided to favor a neutralist coalition that would preclude American military involvement in Laos, yet prevent a Pathet Lao victory. The Soviets, who were extending aid to the Pathet Lao, indicated a readiness to negotiate, and in 1961 talks began in Geneva. After more than a year of tangled negotiations, the three factions in Laos agreed to a neutral coalition. American and Russian aid to the opposing parties was supposed to end, but both countries continued covert operations, while North Vietnam kept open the Ho Chi Minh Trail through eastern Laos, over which it supplied its Vietcong allies in South Vietnam.

There the situation worsened under the leadership of the Catholic premier Ngo Dinh Diem, despite encouraging reports from the military commander of American "advisers" in South Vietnam. At the time the problem was less the scattered Communist guerrilla attacks than Diem's failure to deliver social and economic reforms and his inability to rally popular support. His repressive tactics, directed not only against Communists but also against the Buddhist majority and other critics, played into the hands of his enemies. In 1961 White House assistant
Walt Rostow and General Maxwell Taylor became the first in a long train of presidential emissaries to South Vietnam's capital, Saigon. Focusing on the military situation, they proposed a major increase in the American military presence. Kennedy refused, but continued to dispatch more "advisers" in the hope of stabilizing the situation: when he took office there had been 2,000; by the end of 1963 there were 16,000, none of whom had been officially committed to battle.

By 1963 sharply divergent reports were coming in from the South Vietnamese countryside. Military advisers, their eyes on the inflated "kill ratios" reported by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), drew optimistic conclusions. On-site political reporters, watching the reactions of the Vietnamese people, foresaw continued deterioration without the promised political and economic reforms. By midyear growing Buddhist demonstrations made the discontent in South Vietnam more plainly visible. The spectacle of Buddhist monks immolating themselves in protest brought from Diem's sister-in-law only sarcasm about "barbecued monks." By the fall of 1963 the Kennedy administration had decided that the autocratic Diem was a lost cause. When dissident generals proposed a coup d'état, American ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge assured them that Washington would not stand in the way. On November 1 they seized the government and murdered Diem, though without explicit American approval. But the generals provided no more stability than earlier regimes, as successive coups set the country spinning from one military leader to another.

Kennedy's assassination. By the fall of 1963 Kennedy seemed to be facing up to the intractability of the situation in Vietnam. In September he declared of the South Vietnamese: "In the final analysis it's their war. They're the ones who have to win it or lose it. We can help them as advisers but they have to win it." And the following month he announced the administration's intention to withdraw United States forces from South Vietnam by the end of 1965. What Kennedy would have done has remained a matter of endless controversy among historians, endless because it is unanswerable and unanswerable because on November 22, 1963, while visiting Dallas, he was shot in the neck and head by Lee Harvey Oswald.

Oswald's motives remain unknown. Although a blue-ribbon federal commission appointed by President Johnson and headed by Chief Justice Earl Warren concluded that Oswald acted alone, debate still swirls around various conspiracy theories. Kennedy's death and then the murder of Oswald by Jack Ruby, a Dallas nightclub owner, were shown over and over again on television, the medium that had so helped Kennedy's rise to the presidency and that now captured his death and the moving funeral at Arlington Cemetery. This media spotlight assured his enshrinement in the public imagination as a martyred leader.

Shortly after the funeral Jacqueline Kennedy reminisced for a reporter about their family life. At night they would play records, and the song John Kennedy loved most came from a current Broadway hit, Camelot, based on the legends of King Arthur: "Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment, that was
known as Camelot—and it will never be that way again.” This “Camelot mystique” soon enshrouded the fallen president, magnifying his accomplishments and creating an aura of glamour and poignancy around his legacy. A Gallup poll in 1976 showed that a majority of Americans regarded Kennedy as the greatest of all presidents.

**LYNDON JOHNSON AND THE GREAT SOCIETY**

Texan Lyndon Johnson took the oath as president of the United States on board the plane that took John Kennedy’s body back to Washington from Dallas. At age fifty-five he had spent twenty-six years on the Washington scene and had served nearly a decade as Democratic leader in the Senate, where he had displayed the greatest gift for compromise since Henry Clay. Johnson brought to the White House a marked change of style from Kennedy. A truly self-made man who through gritty determination and shrewd manipulation had worked his way out of a hardscrabble rural Texas background to become one of Washington’s most powerful figures, Johnson had none of the Kennedy’s elegance or charisma. He was a rough-hewn, gregarious, and dominating man who craved both political power and public affection. The first southern president since Woodrow Wilson, he harbored, like another southern president, Andrew Johnson, a sense of being the perpetual “outsider” despite his long experience with power. And indeed he was so regarded by Kennedy’s “insiders.”

Those who viewed Johnson as a stereotypical southern conservative failed to appreciate his long-standing admiration for Franklin Roosevelt, the depth of his concern for poor people, and his commitment to the cause of civil rights. “By political background, by temperament, by personal preference,” wrote one journalist, Johnson was “the riverboat man. He was brawny and rough and skilled beyond measure in the full use of tricky tides and currents, in his knowledge of the hidden shoals. He was a swashbuckling master of the political midstreams—but only in the crowded, well-traveled and familiar inland waterways of domestic politics.” In foreign affairs, however, he was, like Woodrow Wilson, a novice.

**THE LAST FRONTIERSMAN** Lyndon Johnson the man was a paradox. He was neither southern nor western but that unique blend of the two regions, a Texan capable of altering himself to fit any occasion. In one of his favorite stories, he told of an applicant for a teaching job who is asked by the school board whether the world is flat or round. The man replies: “I can teach it either way.” Likewise, Johnson could assume the guise of different characters at will. On the one hand he was a compulsive worker and achiever, animated by greed, ambition, and an all-consuming lust for power, an overbearing man capable of ruthlessness and deceit. The former secretary of state Dean Acheson once told Johnson he was “not a very likable person.” On the other hand, he could be warm, caring, and gracious. He made friends easily and displayed genuine concern for the welfare of the disadvantaged.

Johnson was a fourth-generation Texan who liked to refer to himself as “the last Frontiersman.” His grandfather was a member of the Populist party and his father, Sam, called himself a “latter-day Populist.” Sam Johnson was elected five times to the state legislature, the last congressman who still carried a pistol. When Lyndon was five, his family moved to Johnson City, a desolate village of 325 destitute souls and lots of prickly pears, rattlesnakes, and armadillos. The town had no paved roads, no plumbing or electricity—not even a train station. Illness forced Sam Johnson to resign his legislative post and quit working. The family thereafter lived a hand-to-mouth existence.

Lyndon became an obstreperous son, rebellious and defiant, determined to control others rather than submit to authority himself. He was able to work his way through Southwest Texas State Teachers College. In 1931 he was hired as an assistant to a south Texas congressman and moved to Washington, D.C. Johnson thereafter became an enthusiastic New Dealer and an avid fan of Franklin Roosevelt. In 1935 he returned to Texas to head up the National Youth Administration for the state. He did so well that he was elected to Congress two years later. While visiting Texas, Roosevelt told an aide that he “liked this boy.” He liked him so much that when Johnson ran for a vacant Senate seat in 1941, the president made strenuous efforts to assure his victory. But Johnson lost a narrow, fraudulent election. To him the moral of the story was that one needed to bend the rules to get elected a senator in Texas.

After a stint in the Navy during World War II, which Johnson, like Kennedy, later exaggerated to appear more heroic than it was, he ran for the Senate again in 1948. This time he played the “Texas game,” letting his lieutenants bribe local political bosses to “stuff” ballot boxes in their precincts. At the last minute Johnson won by eighty-seven votes. Johnson tried to deflect criticism by jokingly referring to himself as “Landslide Lyndon,” but a cloud of suspicion hung over him as he assumed his Senate seat. During the early 1950s Johnson kept his seat by engaging in the required “Red-baiting,” catering to the oil and natural gas interests in Texas, and opposing civil rights legislation. In 1950, at age forty-three, he became the youngest Senate whip in Democratic party history. The next year he became minority leader, again the youngest ever.

After reelection in 1954 Johnson became Senate majority leader when the Democrats recaptured the upper house of Congress. During
the next six years he displayed a remarkable ability for manipulating others to get legislation passed, resorting to horse-trading and backroom deals in order to shepherd some 1,300 bills through the Senate. He engineered the censure of Joseph McCarthy and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1957. His accomplishments made him a natural candidate for the presidency in 1960, but he was unable to project himself as anything more than a regional candidate. Having done all he could as a legislative leader, he eagerly accepted Kennedy's invitation to join the ticket. The invitation resulted not from affection or admiration. Kennedy simply needed Johnson to help carry the South for him.

**Politics and Poverty**

Quite naturally, domestic politics became Johnson's first priority as president. Amid the national grief after the assassination, he declared that Kennedy's cabinet and advisers would stay on and that his legislative program, stymied in several congressional committees, would be passed. Given to ceaseless work fourteen hours or more a day, Johnson loved the kind of political infighting and legislative detail that Kennedy had loathed. Reluctant congressmen and senators were brought to the White House for what became famous as "the Johnson Treatment." A journalist described the technique: "He moved in close, his face a scant millimeter from his target, his eyes widening and narrowing, his eyebrows rising and falling. From his pockets poured clippings, memos, statistics. Minicopy, humor, and the genius of analogy made the Treatment an almost hypnotic experience and rendered the target stunned and helpless." The logjam in the Congress that had blocked Kennedy's program broke under Johnson's forceful lead-

...
longest sustained economic booms in American history. The lower taxes produced a surge in capital investment and personal consumption, thus generating higher corporate profits, which in turn led to an increase in tax revenues.

The administration's Economic Opportunity Bill incorporated a wide range of programs: a Job Corps for inner-city youths aged sixteen to twenty-one, a Head Start program for disadvantaged preschoolers, work-study jobs for college students, grants to farmers and rural businesses, loans to those willing to hire the chronically unemployed, the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA, a "domestic Peace Corps"), and the Community Action Program, which would provide "maximum feasible participation" of the poor in directing programs designed for their benefit. Speaking at Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1964, Johnson called for a "Great Society" resting on "abundance and liberty for all. The Great Society demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are fully committed in our time."

THE 1964 ELECTION In the Republican party, a new frenzy of activity was developing on the right. For years party regulars had come to fear that the party had fallen into the hands of an "Eastern Establishment" that had given in to the same internationalism and big-government policies as liberal Democrats. Ever since 1940, so the theory went, the party had nominated "me-too" candidates who merely promised to run more efficiently the programs that Democrats designed. Offer the voters "a choice, not an echo," they reasoned, and a conservative majority would assert itself. The Republican right thus began to drift toward varieties of dogmatic conservatism, ranging from a kind of "aristocratic" intellectual "new conservatism," which found voice in the National Review, edited by William F. Buckley, Jr., to the John Birch Society, founded by Robert Welch, a New England candy manufacturer given to accusing such distinguished citizens as Eisenhower, Dulles, and Chief Justice Warren of supporting a Communist conspiracy.

By 1960 Arizona senator Barry Goldwater, a millionaire departmentstore magnate, had begun to emerge as the leader of the Republican right. In his book The Conscience of a Conservative (1960), Goldwater proposed abolition of the income tax, sale of the TVA, and a drastic overhaul of Social Security. Almost from the time of Kennedy's victory in 1960 a movement to draft Goldwater began, mobilizing right-wing activists to capture party caucuses and contest primaries. In 1964 they took an early lead, and after sweeping the all-important California primary, Goldwater's forces controlled the Republican convention when it gathered in Los Angeles. "I would remind you," Goldwater told the delegates, "that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice."

By the end of the campaign Goldwater had achieved a position of splendid isolation on the far right of the political spectrum. He had a gift for frightening voters. Accusing the administration of waging a "no-win" war in Vietnam, he urged wholesale bombing of North Vietnam and left the impression of being trigger-happy. He savaged Johnson's War on Poverty and the entire New Deal tradition. At one stop he called LBJ the "Santa Claus of the free lunch." In Tennessee he proposed the sale of the Tennessee Valley Authority; in St. Petersburg, Florida, a major retirement community, he questioned the value of Social Security. He was on record as opposing both the nuclear test ban and the Civil Rights Act. To Republican campaign buttons that claimed "In your heart, you know he's right," Democrats responded, "In your guts you know he's nuts."

Johnson, on the other hand, appealed to the great consensus that spanned most of the political spectrum. Conceding the Democratic nomination from the start, he chose as his running mate Hubert Humphrey from Minnesota, a prominent liberal senator who had long promoted the cause of civil rights. In contrast to Goldwater's bellicose rhetoric on Vietnam, Johnson pledged: "We are not about to send American boys nine or ten thousand miles from home to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves"—a statement reminiscent of the assurance that Johnson's idol, Franklin Roosevelt, had voiced regarding the European war in 1940.

The result was a landslide. Johnson polled 61 percent of the total votes; Goldwater carried only Arizona and five states in the Deep South,
where race remained the salient issue. Vermont went Democratic for the first time ever in a presidential election. Johnson won the electoral vote by a whopping 482 to 52. In the Senate the Democrats increased their majority by two (68 to 32) and in the House by thirty-seven (285 to 140). But LBJ was aware that a mandate such as he had received could quickly erode. He shrewdly told aides, “every day I’m in office, I’m going to lose votes. I’m going to alienate somebody... We’ve got to get this legislation fast. You’ve got to get it during my honeymoon.”

LANDMARK LEGISLATION Johnson flooded the new Congress with Great Society legislation that, he promised, would end poverty, revitalize the decaying central cities, provide every young American with the chance to attend college, protect the health of the elderly, enhance the cultural life of the nation, clean up the air and water, and make the highways safer. The scope of Johnson’s legislation was unparalleled since Franklin Roosevelt’s Hundred Days.

Priority went to health insurance and aid to education, proposals that had languished since President Truman advanced them in 1945. For twenty years the proposal for a comprehensive plan of medical insurance had been stalled by the American Medical Association. But now that Johnson had the votes, the AMA joined Republicans in boarding the bandwagon for a bill serving those over age sixty-five. The AMA proposed, in addition to hospital insurance, a program for payment of doctor bills and drug costs with the government footing half the premium. The act that finally emerged went well beyond the original program. It not only incorporated the new proposal into the Medicare program for the aged, but added another program, dubbed Medicaid, for federal grants to states that would help cover medical payments for the indigent. President Johnson signed the bill on July 30, 1965, in Independence, Missouri, with eighty-one-year-old Harry Truman looking on.

Five days after he submitted his Medicare program, Johnson sent to Congress his proposal for $1.5 billion in federal aid to elementary and secondary education. Such proposals had been ignored since the 1940s, blocked alternately by issues of segregation or separation of church and state. The first issue had been laid to rest, legally at least, by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Now the Congress devised a means of extending aid to “poverty-impacted” school districts regardless of their public or parochial character. This measure Johnson signed in the dilapidated one-room schoolhouse he had first attended, with his first-grade teacher looking on.

The momentum generated by the progress of these measures had already begun to carry others along, and the momentum continued through the following year. Before the Eighty-ninth Congress adjourned, it had established a record in the passage of landmark legislation unequalled since the time of the New Deal. Altogether the tide of Great Society legislation had carried 435 bills through the Congress. Among them was the Appalachian Regional Development Act of 1966, which provided $1 billion for programs in remote mountain areas. The Housing and Urban Development Act of 1965 provided aid for construction of 240,000 units of housing and $3 billion for urban renewal. Funds for rent supplements for low-income families followed in 1966, and in that year a new Department of Housing and Urban Development appeared, headed by Robert C. Weaver, the first black cabinet member. Johnson had, in the words of one Washington reporter, “brought to harvest a generation’s backlog of ideas and social legislation.”

THE IMMIGRATION ACT Little noticed in the stream of legislation flowing from the Congress was a major new immigration bill that had originated in the Kennedy White House. In collaboration with the Anti-Defamation League, John Kennedy had written a pamphlet in 1958 entitled “A Nation of Immigrants,” in which he celebrated the role played by immigration in shaping the United States and emphasized the need for revising the immigration regulations. In 1963 he sent to Congress a new immigration bill, but it was languishing in committee when he was assassinated. Johnson used his 1964 State of the Union address to endorse immigration reform in general and the Kennedy bill in particular. A modified version finally passed the Congress in the fall of 1965.

President Johnson signed the Immigration Act of 1965 in a ceremony held on Liberty Island in New York Harbor, with Ellis Island in the background. In his speech, he stressed that the new law would redress the wrong done to those “from southern and eastern Europe” and the “developing continents” of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It did so by abolishing the discriminatory quotas based on national origins that had governed immigration policy since the 1920s. The old system had favored immigrants from Britain and other countries in western Europe and had effectively shut the door to most people from eastern Europe and Asia. The new law, whose provisions were to take full effect in 1968, treated all nationalities and races equally. In place of national quotas it created hemispheric ceilings on visas issued: 170,000 for persons from outside the Western Hemisphere, 120,000 for persons from within. It also stipulated that no more than 20,000 people could come from any one country each year. The new act allowed the entry of immediate family members of American residents without limit. For others, the immigration bill provided a revised system of preferences used to decide which applicants qualified for admission. Most of the annual
visas were to be given on a first-come-first-served basis to "other relatives" of American residents, and only a small proportion (about 10 percent) were allocated to those with special talents or job skills.

The Immigration Act of 1965 passed with so little opposition in part because no one expected it to generate profound change. Attorney-General Robert Kennedy told the Senate that perhaps as many as 5,000 Asians might come the first year, "after which immigration from that source would virtually disappear." But he was wrong. During the prosperous sixties, few western Europeans sought to emigrate to the United States; those living in Communist-controlled eastern Europe could not leave. But Asians and Latin Americans flocked to American consulates in search of visas. And within a few years the new arrivals in turn used the family-preference system to bring their family members as well.

This so-called chain immigration quickly filled the annual quotas for nations such as the Philippines, Mexico, Korea, and the Dominican Republic, and the Dominicans and Asians became the largest contingent of new Americans.

The Great Society programs included several genuine success stories. The Highway Safety Act and the Traffic Safety Act (1966) established safety standards for automobile manufacturers and highway design, and the scholarships provided for college students under the Higher Education Act (1965) were quite popular. Many Great Society initiatives aimed at improving the health, nutrition, and education of poor Americans, young and old, made some headway against these problems. So, too, did federal efforts to clean up air and water pollution. But several ambitious programs were hastily designed and ill conceived, others were vastly underfunded, and many were mismanaged. Medicare, for example, removed any incentives for hospitals to control costs, and medical bills skyrocketed. Often funds appropriated for various programs never made it through the tangled bureaucracy to the needy. Widely publicized cases of welfare fraud became a powerful weapon in the hands of those opposed to liberal social programs. By 1966 middle-class resentment over the cost and waste of the Great Society programs helped generate a conservative backlash.

FROM CIVIL RIGHTS TO BLACK POWER

The civil-rights movement Among the successes of the Great Society were several landmark pieces of civil-rights legislation. After Kennedy's death, President Johnson, who had maneuvered through the Senate the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960, called for passage of a new civil-rights bill as a memorial to the fallen leader. With bipartisan support he finally broke the Senate filibuster mounted by a diminishing band of bitter-enders. "Nothing," said Republican Senate leader Everett Dirksen, quoting the French writer Victor Hugo, "is so powerful as an idea whose time has come."

On July 2 Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the most far-reaching civil-rights measure ever enacted by the Congress. The act outlawed discrimination in hotels, restaurants, and other public accommodations. It required that literacy tests for voting be administered in writing, and defined as literate anybody who had finished the sixth grade. The attorney-general could now bring suits for school desegregation, relieving parents of a painful necessity. Federally assisted programs and private employers alike were required to eliminate discrimination. An Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (the old Fair Employment Practices Committee re-born) administered a ban on job discrimination by race, religion, national origin, or sex.

Early in 1965 Dr. Martin Luther King announced a drive to enroll the 3 million blacks in the South who had not registered to vote. In Selma, Alabama, the focus at the outset, he found in Sheriff Jim Clark a foil as perfect as Birmingham's police chief. On March 7 civil-rights protesters began a march to Montgomery, about 50 miles away, only to be violently dispersed by state troopers and a mounted pose. A federal judge agreed to allow the march, and President Johnson provided protection with National Guardsmen and army military police. By March 25, when the demonstrators reached Montgomery, some 35,000 peo-
tion of Malcolm X especially tragic was that he had just months before
taken his strident antigovernment rhetoric and preach a biracial
message of social change.

Although widely publicized and highly visible, the “black power”
movement never attracted more than a small minority of African Amer-
cians. Only about 15 percent of blacks labeled themselves separatists.
The preponderant majority continued to identify with the philosophy
of nonviolent integration promoted by Martin Luther King and organi-
sations such as the NAACP. King criticized black separatism and the
promotion of violent social change as a “milieuistic philosophy.” He
reminded his followers that “we can’t win violently. We have neither
the instruments nor the techniques at our disposal, and it would be
totally absurd for us to believe we could do it.”

Yet the black power philosophy, despite its hyperbole, violence, and
the small number of its adherents, had two very positive effects upon
the civil rights movement. First, it helped African Americans take pride
in their racial heritage. As Malcolm X often pointed out, prolonged slav-
ery and institutionalized racism eroded the self-esteem of many blacks
in the United States. “The worst crime the white man has committed,”
he declared, “has been to make us hate ourselves.” He and others
helped blacks appreciate their African roots and their American accom-
plishments. In fact, it was Malcolm X who insisted that blacks call them-
selves African Americans as a symbol of pride in their roots and as a
spur to learn more about their history as a people. As the popular singer
James Brown urged, “Say it loud—I’m black and I’m proud.”

Second, the black power phenomenon forced King and other main-
stream black leaders and organizations to launch a new stage in the
civil rights movement that would focus attention on the plight of poor
inner-city blacks. Legal access to restaurants, schools, and other public
accommodations, King pointed out, meant little to people mired in a
culture of urban poverty. They needed jobs and decent housing as
much as they needed legal rights. To this end, King began to emphasize
the economic plight of the black urban underclass. The time had come
for radical measures “to provide jobs and income for the poor.” Yet
as King and others sought to escalate the war on poverty at home, the
war in Vietnam was commandeering more and more of America’s resources
and energies.

THE TRAGEDY OF VIETNAM

As racial violence erupted in America’s cities, the war in Vietnam
reached new levels of intensity and destruction. In November 1963,
when John Kennedy was assassinated, there were 16,000 American mil-
itary “advisers” in South Vietnam. Lyndon Johnson inherited an Amer-
ican commitment to prevent a Communist takeover there as well as a
reluctance on the part of American presidents to assume primary
responsibility for fighting the Vietcong (Communist-led guerrillas in
South Vietnam) and their North Vietnamese allies. Beginning with Tru-
man, one president after another had done just enough to avoid being
charged with having “lost” Vietnam to communism. Johnson initially
sought to do the same, fearing that any other course of action would
undermine his political influence and jeopardize his Great Society
programs in Congress. But this path took him and the United States inex-
orably deeper into an expanding military commitment in southeast Asia.

During the presidential campaign of 1964 Johnson had opposed the
use of American combat troops and had privately described Vietnam as
“a raggedy-ass fourth-rate country” not worthy of American blood and
money. Nevertheless, by the end of 1965 there were 184,000 American
troops in Vietnam; in 1966 the troop level reached 355,000; and by
1969, the height of the American presence, 542,000. By the time the
last American troops left in March 1973, some 59,000 Americans had
died and another 300,000 had been wounded. The war had cost the
American taxpayers $150 billion, generated economic dislocations that
destroyed many Great Society programs, produced 570,000 draft
offenders and 563,000 less-than-honorable discharges from the service,
topped Johnson’s administration, and divided the country as no event in
American history had since the Civil War.

ESCALATION The official sanction for “escalation”—a Defense
Department term coined in the Vietnam era—was the Tonkin Gulf
Resolution, voted by Congress on August 7, 1964. Johnson told a
national television audience that two American destroyers, the U.S.S. 
Maddox and C. Turner Joy, had been attacked by North Vietnamese vessels on August 2 and 4 in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of North Vietnam. Although Johnson described the attack as unprovoked, in 
truth the destroyers had been monitoring South Vietnamese attacks 
against two North Vietnamese islands—attacks planned by American 
advisers. The Tonkin Gulf Resolution authorized the president to “take 
all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of 
the United States and to prevent further aggression.” Only Senator 
Wayne Morse of Oregon and Senator Ernest Gruening of Alaska voted 
against the resolution, which Johnson thereafter interpreted as equiva-
 lent to a congressional declaration of war.

Soon after his landslide victory over Goldwater in 1964, Johnson 
made the crucial decisions that shaped American policy in Vietnam for 
the next four years. On February 5, 1965, the Vietcong killed eight and 
wounded 395 Americans at Pleiku. Further attacks on Americans later 
that week led Johnson to order operation “Rolling Thunder,” the first 
sustained bombings of North Vietnam, which were intended to stop the 
flow of soldiers and supplies into the south. Six months later a task force 
conducted an extensive study of the bombing’s effects on the supplies 
pouring down the Ho Chi Minh Trail from North Vietnam through 
Laos. It concluded that there was “no way” to stop the traffic.

In March 1965 the new American army commander in Vietnam, 
General William C. Westmoreland, requested and received the first 
installment of combat troops. By the summer American forces were 
engaged in “search-and-destroy” operations, thus ending the fiction that 
American soldiers were only “advisers.” And as combat operations 
increased, so did the mounting list of American casualties, announced 
each week on the nightly news along with the “body count” of alleged 
Vietcong dead. “Westy’s War,” although fought with helicopter gun-
ships, chemical defoliants, and napalm, became like the trench warfare 
of World War I—a war of attrition.

THE CONTEXT FOR POLICY   Johnson’s decision to “Americanize” the war, 
so ill-starred in retrospect, was consistent with the foreign policy princi-
ple pursued by all American presidents after World War II. The ver-

tion of the containment theory articulated in the Truman Doctrine, 
edorsed by Eisenhower and Dulles throughout the 1950s, and reaffirmed by Kennedy, pledged United States opposition to the advance of communist anywhere in the world. “Why are we in Vietnam?” Johnson 
asked rhetorically at Johns Hopkins University in 1965, “We are there 
because we have a promise to keep. . . . To leave Vietnam to its 
fate would shake the confidence of all these people in the value of 
American commitment.” Secretary of State Dean Rusk repeated this 
rationale before countless congressional committees, warning that Thai-
land, Burma, and the rest of Southeast Asia would fall to communism if 
American forces withdrew. American military intervention in Vietnam 
was not an aberration, but a logical culmination of the assumptions 
widely shared by the foreign policy establishment and leaders of both 
political parties since the early days of the Cold War.

Vietnam was not an aberration, and the “Pentagon Papers” subse-
sequently made it clear that the United States did not “stumble into 
a quagmire.” Undersecretary of State George Ball consistently warned of 
disaster: “Once on the tiger’s back we cannot be sure of picking the 
place to dismount.” It was also clear to Johnson and his advisers from 
the start that American military involvement must not reach levels that 
would provoke the Chinese or Soviets into direct intervention. And this 
meant, in effect, that a complete military victory was never possible. “It 
was startling to me to find out,” said the new secretary of defense, Clark 
Clifford, in 1968, “that we have no military plan to end the war.” The 
goal of the United States was not to win the war in any traditional sense, 
but to prevent the North Vietnamese and Vietcong from winning. This 
meant that America would have to maintain a military presence as long 
as the enemy retained the will to fight.

As it turned out, American support for the war eroded faster than the 
will of the North Vietnamese leaders to tolerate devastating casualties. 
Systematic opposition to the war on college campuses began in 1965 with “teach-ins” at the University of Michigan. And in 1966 Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, began congressional investigations into American pol-
icy. George Kennan, the founding father of the containment doctrine, 
told Fulbright’s committee that the doctrine was appropriate for 
Europe, but not Southeast Asia. And a respected general testified that 
Westmoreland’s military strategy had no chance of achieving victory.
By 1967 opposition to the war had become so pronounced that antiwar demonstrations in New York and at the Pentagon attracted massive support. Nightly television accounts of the fighting—Vietnam was the first war to receive extended television coverage, and hence has been dubbed “the living room war”—made the official optimism appear fatuous. By May 1967 even Secretary of Defense McNamara was waver: “The picture of the world’s greatest superpower killing or injuring 1,000 noncombatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one.”

In a war of political will, North Vietnam had the advantage. Johnson and his advisers grievously underestimated the tenacity of the North Vietnamese commitment to unify Vietnam and expel the United States. Ho Chi Minh had warned the French in the 1940s that “You can kill ten of my men for every one I kill of yours, but even at those odds, you will lose and I will win.” He predicted that the Vietnamese Communists would win a war of attrition, for they were willing to sacrifice all for their cause. While the United States fought a limited war for limited objectives, the Vietnamese Communists fought an all-out war for their very survival. Indeed, just as General Westmoreland was assuring Johnson and the American public that the American war effort in early 1968 was on the verge of gaining the upper hand, the Communists again displayed their tenacity.

**THE TURNING POINT**  On January 31, 1968, the first day of the Vietnamese New Year (Tet), the Vietcong defied a holiday truce to launch assaults on American and South Vietnamese forces throughout South Vietnam. The old capital city of Huế fell to the Communists, and Vietcong units temporarily occupied the grounds of the American embassy in Saigon. General Westmoreland proclaimed the Tet offensive a major defeat for the Vietcong, and most students of military strategy later agreed with him. But while Vietcong casualties were enormous, the impact of the events on the American public was more telling. Time and Newsweek soon ran antiwar editorials urging American withdrawal. Walter Cronkite, the dean of American television journalists, confided to his viewers that he no longer believed the war was winnable. “If I’ve lost Walter,” Johnson was reported to say, “then it’s over. I’ve lost Mr. Average Citizen.” Polls showed that Johnson’s popularity had declined to 35 percent, lower than any president since Truman’s darkest days. Civil-rights leaders and social activists felt betrayed as they saw federal funds earmarked for the war on poverty siphoned off by the expanding war. In 1968 the United States was spending $322,000 on every Communist killed in Vietnam; the poverty programs at home received only $33 per person.

During 1968 Johnson grew increasingly embittered and isolated. It
had become painfully evident that the Vietnam War was a never-ending stalemate. Clark Clifford, the secretary of defense, reported to Johnson that a task force of prominent soldiers and civilians saw no prospect for a military victory. Robert Kennedy was reportedly considering a run for the presidency in order to challenge Johnson’s Vietnam policy. And Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota had already made the decision to oppose Johnson in the Democratic primaries. With antiwar students rallying to his candidacy, McCarthy polled 42 percent of the vote to Johnson’s 48 percent in New Hampshire’s March primary. It was a remarkable showing for a little-known senator. Each presidential primary now promised to become a referendum on Johnson’s Vietnam policy. In Wisconsin, scene of the next primary, the president’s political advisers forecast a humiliating defeat: “We sent a man [to campaign for Johnson] and all we’ve heard from him since is a few faint beeps, like the last radio signals from the Bay of Pigs.”

Despite Johnson’s troubles with foreign policy, he remained a master at reading the political omens. On March 31 he went on national television to announce a limited halt to the bombing of North Vietnam and fresh initiatives for a negotiated cease-fire. Then he added a dramatic postscript: “I have concluded that I should not permit the Presidency to become involved in the partisan divisions that are developing in this political year. Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept the nomination of my party for another term as your President.” Although American troops would remain in Vietnam for five more years and the casualties would continue, the quest for military victory had ended. Now the question was how the most powerful nation in the world could extricate itself from Vietnam with a minimum of damage to its prestige.

A traumatic year  History moved at a fearful pace throughout the 1960s, but 1968 was a year of extreme turbulence even for that tumultuous decade. On April 4, only four days after Johnson’s announced withdrawal, Martin Luther King was gunned down while standing on the balcony of his motel in Memphis, Tennessee. The assassin, James Earl Ray, had expressed hostility toward blacks, but debate still continues over whether he was a pawn in an organized conspiracy. King’s death set off an outpouring of grief among whites and blacks. It also ignited riots in over sixty American cities, with the most serious occurring in Chicago and Washington, D.C.

Two months later, on June 6, Robert Kennedy was shot in the head by a young Palestinian, Sirhan Sirhan, who resented Kennedy’s strong support of Israel. Kennedy’s death occurred at the end of the day on which he had convincingly defeated Eugene McCarthy in the California primary, thereby assuming leadership of the anti-war forces in the race for the Democratic nomination for president. Political reporter David Halberstam of the New York Times thought back to the assassinations of John Kennedy and Malcolm X; then the violent end of King, the most influential black leader of the twentieth century, and then Robert Kennedy, the heir to leadership of the Kennedy clan. “We could make a calendar of the decade,” Halberstam wrote, “by marking where we were at the hours of those violent deaths.”
campaign was hurt by his running mate, retired air force general Curtis LeMay, who favored expanding the war in Vietnam and spoke approvingly of using nuclear weapons. (It was reported that LeMay was the model for the deranged general in the 1964 film *Doctor Strangelove: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*.) In October 1968 Humphrey announced that he would stop bombing North Vietnam “as an acceptable risk for peace.” Eugene McCarthy, who had been strangely silent and had even spent some time cloistered in a Benedictine monastery, eventually endorsed Humphrey. “I believe the Vice-President is a man who can be relied on to tell the difference between the pale horse of death and the white horse of victory,” said McCarthy. “I am not sure Nixon can make that distinction.”

Nixon and Governor Spiro Agnew of Maryland, his running mate, eked out a narrow victory by about 500,000 votes, a margin of about 1 percentage point. The electoral vote was more decisive, 301 to 191. Wallace received 10 million votes, 13.5 percent of the total, for the best showing by a third-party candidate since Robert La Follette in 1924. All but one of Wallace’s 46 electoral votes were from the Deep South. Nixon swept all but four of the states west of the Mississippi. Humphrey’s support came almost exclusively from the Northeast.

And so at the end of a turbulent year near the end of a traumatic decade, power passed peacefully to a president who was associated with the complacency of the 1950s. A nation that had seemed on the verge of
consuming itself in spasms of violence looked to Richard Nixon to provide what he had promised in the campaign: “peace with honor” in Vietnam and a middle ground on which a majority of Americans, silent or otherwise, could come together.

**FURTHER READING**


*These books are available in paperback editions.*


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**REBELLION AND REACTION IN THE 1960s AND 1970s**

**THE ROOTS OF REBELLION**

As Richard Nixon entered the White House, he faced a nation whose social fabric was in tatters. Everywhere, it seemed, traditional institutions and notions of authority had come under attack. The turbulent events of 1968 revealed how deeply divided American society had become and how difficult a task Nixon faced in carrying out his pledge to restore social harmony. Not surprisingly, the stability he promised proved to be elusive. His policies and his combative temperament served to heighten rather than reduce the tensions wracking the nation. Those tensions had been long in developing and reflected profound fissures in the postwar consensus promoted by Eisenhower and inherited by Kennedy and Johnson. What had caused such a seismic breakdown in social harmony? Ironically, many of the same forces that had promoted the flush times of the Eisenhower years helped generate the social upheavals of the 1960s.

**YOUTH REVOLT** By the 1960s the "baby boomers" were maturing. Now young adults, they differed from their elders in that they had experienced neither economic depression nor a major war. They also had grown up amid the homogenizing effects of a flourishing consumer culture and television. Moreover, they viewed the Cold War primarily as a battle of words and gestures without immediate consequences for them. Record numbers of these young people were attending American colleges and universities during the 1960s: college enrollment quadrupled between 1945 and 1970. At the same time, many universities had