

What role do you think racial and anti-Vietnam War protest played in bringing about the conservative political backlash of the late 1960s and early 1970s?

During the 1960s and 1970s, the United States of America saw an end to its Golden Age following its victory during the Second World War. The United States had proclaimed that it fought for democracy, freedom, and equality on the international stage. At the same time that the United States was attempting to uphold ideals of freedom in foreign parts of the world, it was failing to support equality for all of its citizens domestically. The US's post war development and growth was not shared by all its people, with African Americans being left significantly behind. The expansion of the Civil Rights Movement saw to a change in the civil liberties and rights of African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s.¹ Also, in the wake of the Second World War, the US continued to uphold its ideology of democracy and fight against radical governments including the rise of Communism in Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia. In 1961, President John F Kennedy began putting military advisors on the ground in Vietnam in the hopes of protecting democracy, and stopping the spread of Communism.² However, as the war continued through two more Presidential administrations, with Presidents Lyndon B Johnson and Richard Nixon, the war proved to be wildly unsuccessful. The failed war in Vietnam resulted in a rise of counterculture and protest against the US government, and the American status quo.³ As the euphoria of the United States's victory in Europe and Asia faded, and with the failed military action in Vietnam, the US was forced to confront its deeply entrenched inequalities. There was an explosion of protest and counterculture in the US in the 1960s, and early 1970s that resulted in a

¹ Leonard Moore, "The Universe of Protest and Backlash." (McGill, Montreal, 01/13)

² Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*. (2015), page XXX

³ Moore, "The Universe of Protest and Backlash." (McGill, Montreal, 01/13)

great upheaval and turmoil in American society. It was a pushback against the strict, unjust, racist traditions of American society. However, this pushback came in the form of nonviolent protest until that did not make enough progress. The nonviolent protest morphed into violent action throughout the country, leading to some Americans wanting peace over justice. These protests and demands for a more fair country resulted in a political backlash on the part of conservative Americans who wanted peace for themselves and their families. It gave fuel to the rise of the new Republican Party, a more outspoken, extreme conservative party that stood for morality and order.

The Civil Rights Movement began almost immediately after the end of the American Civil War and slavery. However, it did not see substantive progress until the mid 20th century.⁴ The major successes of the Civil Rights Movement included the end of segregation, federal legislation to stop the disenfranchisement of African American voters, particularly in the South.⁵ The Civil Rights Movement faced difficulties as a movement due to the diverse group of various organizations that came together and fought for equality. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), led by a minister named Martin Luther King Jr, was an organization centered on achieving equality through nonviolent means.⁶ The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), whose notable leaders included John Lewis, was another peaceful organization that worked in close coordination with the SCLC.⁷ These two organizations contributed to the rise of nonviolent civil disobedience throughout the US, most notably including the marches from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama and the March on

⁴ Leonard Moore, "The Universe of Protest and Backlash." (McGill, Montreal, 01/13)

⁵ Leonard Moore, "The Universe of Protest and Backlash." (McGill, Montreal, 01/13)

⁶ Leonard Moore, "The Universe of Protest and Backlash." (McGill, Montreal, 01/13)

⁷ Moore, "The Universe of Protest and Backlash." (McGill, Montreal, 01/13)

Washington. The marches from Selma to Montgomery were met with police violence. On one occasion, on March 7th, 1965, the marches turned so violent that protesters were killed, which led to the day being referred to as “Bloody Sunday.”⁸ These two organizations saw great successes. Their actions led to the passage of the 1964 Voting Act, along with a constitutional amendment to make poll taxes and other means of voter suppression illegal.⁹ The response to this nonviolent protest was met by police violence, throughout the US but particularly in the South.

The heavy presence of police violence made many African Americans begin to reject the nonviolent ideologies of SCLC and SNCC. There were some African Americans who wanted to advocate for self protection, with a much more Black nationalist ideology. These groups were much more open to the use of violence. One clear connection between the racial protest movements and the conservative political backlash of the 1960s was between the Black Panther Party and Republican state legislators. In 1966, the Black Panther Party, a Black nationalist group that started in Oakland, California, began to follow police cars to watch for attempts of police brutality, which had long been an issue throughout the United States.¹⁰ The Black Panthers armed themselves with guns as well, citing the Second Amendment which conservatives argued would allow for citizens to bear arms unregulated by the state. They armed themselves for what they claimed was self protection from police. This had a direct impact over white conservatives in California. White conservatives were moved by fear to pass early modern gun control laws, in the hopes of limiting Black Americans’

⁸ Moore, “The Universe of Protest and Backlash.” (McGill, Montreal, 01/13)

⁹ Moore, “The Universe of Protest and Backlash.” (McGill, Montreal, 01/13)

¹⁰ Leonard Moore, “The Universe of Protest and Backlash.” (McGill, Montreal, 01/18)

access to firearms.¹¹ This demonstrates the influence of the Civil Rights Movement over conservative Americans.

One of the other major contributors to the conservative backlash of the late 1960s and 1970s was the antiwar movement. The Vietnam War had developed into an ugly conflict in which the United States was badly losing. President Lyndon B. Johnson continued to commit more troops to Vietnam despite knowing that there was little hope of success for the US.¹² The antiwar movement was the reaction of many young people witnessing the horrors of the war playing out on their televisions. New media developments meant that Americans could see the realities of the war for themselves right in their living room. The antiwar movement started on college campuses as students became angry and upset about the failures, and injustices of the Vietnam War. These students protests were a reaction to the news that the government was lying to the American people. The student movements on would become more confrontational as the Vietnam War continued to escalate.

As a whole, the antiwar movement, on and off college campuses, was escalating. In 1968, at the Democratic National Convention (DNC) in Chicago saw some of the greatest violence of the 1960s. There was a large protest against the Democratic Party, which as the party of President Lyndon B. Johnson, was seen as a symbol of the injustices of the Vietnam War. The city erupted in protests with people pouring in from all over the country. The mayor of Chicago, Richard Daley, escalated the protests, unleashing police, giving them orders to crush the protesters. The Democratic candidates condemned the action with one calling the action “gestapo tactics in the

¹¹ Moore, “The Universe of Protest and Backlash.” (McGill, Montreal, 01/18)

¹² Leonard Moore, “Vietnam War.” (McGill, Montreal, 01/11)

streets of Chicago.”¹³ With the Convention being in Chicago, there was widespread media coverage of the protests. The protesters wrongly assumed that the public would side with them, but more and more Americans sided with the police.¹⁴ This demonstrated the rejection on the part of Americans to the widespread violence which they blamed on the protesters.

Simply put, for many white middle class and upper middle class Americans, these protests against traditions and “American values” were seen as attacks on the United States itself. Their own lives were comfortable and fair. Their lives did not include the day to day injustices that African Americans were protesting. In addition, they were threatened by the possibility of African Americans having equal rights because they saw it as a challenge to their jobs and livelihood. Simultaneously, there were plenty of Americans that were unhappy with the Vietnam War.¹⁵ However, they were not going to attack the institutions that they had been brought up to revere. They saw the children protesting the Vietnam War as spoiled and naive. They viewed the antiwar movement as attacking the most respected parts of American life and culture, like the President and the federal government which had for many years been seen as a “champion of democracy and equal rights.”¹⁶

The chaos and violence that characterized the 1960s laid a foundation for President Nixon to capitalize on and win in 1968. The protest culture allowed for him to campaign on the idea of peace, getting the US out of Vietnam, and morality. The term “silent majority” was coined by his campaign as a way to describe the group of

¹³ Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*. (2015), page 185

¹⁴ Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*. (2015), page 185

¹⁵ Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*. (2015), page 198

¹⁶ Moore, “The Universe of Protest and Backlash.” (McGill, Montreal, 01/13)

moderate and conservative Americans that wanted peace and restoration of “American values.”¹⁷

In conclusion, there was a rise in political unrest in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s as a result of more and more Americans coming to terms with the deep, systemic injustices that existed in their society. The result of African Americans struggling for years to achieve equal rights and opportunities led to conservative anger. These protest movements challenged American life and society to become more fair and just as it is spelled out in the US Constitution. Taking inspiration from the ideologies of the Civil Rights Movement, the antiwar movement that exploded all over the country on college campuses. These students were disillusioned and angry with the federal government's failures. They saw the federal government as callous, leaving American soldiers to die and killing Vietnamese civilians. They saw the American establishment as disloyal, lying to the American public about the progress of the war. This led to a strong crisis of faith in the American government, and by extension American traditions and values. These protest movements angered moderate and conservative Americans who wanted to uphold their way of life, and what they viewed as “American values.”

¹⁷ Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*. (2015), page 199 & 200