

The History of the 1970s

The 1970s were a tumultuous time. In some ways, the decade was a continuation of the 1960s. Women, African Americans, Native Americans, gays and lesbians and other marginalized people continued their fight for equality, and many Americans joined the protest against the ongoing war in Vietnam. In other ways, however, the decade was a repudiation of the 1960s. A **“New Right”** mobilized in defense of political conservatism and traditional family roles, and the behaviour of President Richard Nixon undermined many people’s faith in the good intentions of the federal government. By the end of the decade, these divisions and disappointments had set a tone for public life that many would argue is still with us today in the Trump era.

The Conservative Backlash:

Many Americans, particularly working class and middle-class whites, responded to the turbulence of the late 1960s, including the urban riots, the antiwar protests, the alienating counterculture, by embracing a new kind of conservative populism. Sick of what they interpreted as spoiled hippies and whining protestors and tired of an interfering government that, in their view, coddled poor people and black people at taxpayer expense, these individuals formed what political strategists called a **“silentmajority.”**

This silent majority swept President Richard Nixon into office in 1968. Almost immediately, Nixon began to dismantle the welfare state that had fostered such resentment. He abolished as many parts of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s **“War on Poverty”** as he could, and he made a show of his resistance to mandatory school desegregation plans such as busing.

On the other hand, some of Nixon’s domestic policies seem remarkably liberal today: For instance, he proposed a Family Assistance Plan that would have guaranteed every American family an income of \$1,600 a year (about \$10,000 in today’s money), and he urged Congress to pass a Comprehensive Health Insurance Plan that would have guaranteed affordable health care to all Americans. In general, though, Nixon’s policies favored the interests of the middle-class people who felt slighted by the **“Great Society”** of the 1960s.

As the 1970s continued, some of these people helped shape a new political movement known as the **“New Right.”** This movement, rooted in the suburban **Sun Belt** (15 Southern states extending from Virginia and Florida in the Southeast, through Nevada in the Southwest, including California), celebrated the free market and

lamented the decline of “traditional” social values and roles. New Right conservatives resented and resisted what they saw as government meddling. For example, they fought against high taxes, environmental regulations, highway speed limits, national park policies in the West, where states began to demand that the federal government turn over control of land, and affirmative action and school desegregation plans.

The Environmental Movement:

In some ways, though, 1960s liberalism continued to flourish. For example, the crusade to protect the environment from all sorts of assaults, including toxic industrial waste in places like **Love Canal**, New York, dangerous meltdowns at nuclear power plants such as the one at **Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania**, and highways through city neighborhoods, really took off during the 1970s.

Americans celebrated the first **Earth Day** in 1970, and Congress passed the **National Environmental Policy Act** that same year. The **Clean Air Act** and the **Clean Water Act** followed two years later. The oil crisis of the late 1970s drew further attention to the issue of conservation. By then, environmentalism was so mainstream that the U.S. Forest Service’s Woodsy Owl interrupted Saturday morning cartoons to remind kids to “Give a Hoot; Don’t Pollute.”

Fighting for Women’s Rights:

During the 1970s, many groups of Americans continued to fight for expanded social and political rights. In 1972, after years of campaigning by feminists, Congress approved the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution, which reads: **“Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.”** It seemed that the Amendment would pass easily. Twenty-two of the necessary 38 states ratified it right away, and the remaining states seemed close behind. However, the ERA alarmed many conservative activists, who feared that it would undermine traditional gender roles. These activists mobilized against the Amendment and managed to defeat it. In 1977, Indiana became the 35th—and last—state to ratify the ERA.

Disappointments like these encouraged many women’s rights activists to turn away from politics. They began to build feminist communities and organizations of their own: art galleries and bookstores, consciousness-raising groups, daycare and women’s health collectives, such as the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, which published **“Our Bodies, Ourselves”**, in 1973, which encouraged women to better understand how their bodies worked and to love who and what they were. They were also part of creating the first rape crisis centers and abortion clinics.

The Anti-War Movement:

Even though very few people continued to support the war in Vietnam, President Nixon feared that a retreat would make the United States look weak. As a result, instead of ending the war, Nixon and his aides devised ways to make it more palatable, such as limiting the draft and shifting the burden of combat onto South Vietnamese soldiers.

This policy seemed to work at the beginning of Nixon's term in office. When the United States invaded Cambodia in 1970, however, hundreds of thousands of protestors clogged city streets and shut down college campuses. On May 4, 1970, National Guardsmen shot four student demonstrators at an antiwar rally at Kent State University in Ohio in what came to be known as the "**Kent State Massacre**", immortalized in the song "**Ohio**" by Neil Young.

Ten days later, police officers killed two black student protestors at Mississippi's Jackson State University. Members of Congress tried to limit the President's power by revoking the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution authorizing the use of military force in Southeast Asia, but Nixon simply ignored them. Even after the *New York Times* published the **Pentagon Papers**, which called the government's justifications for war into question, the bloody and inconclusive conflict continued. American troops did not leave the region until 1973.

The Watergate Scandal:

As his term in office wore on, President Nixon grew increasingly paranoid and defensive. Though he won reelection by a landslide in 1972, he resented any challenge to his authority and approved of attempts to discredit those who opposed him. In June 1972, police found five burglars from Nixon's own "**Committee to Re-Elect the President**" in the office of the Democratic National Committee, located in the Watergate Hotel and office building. Soon, they found that Nixon himself was involved in the crime: He had demanded that the FBI stop investigating the break-in and told his aides to cover up the scandal.

In April 1974, a Congressional committee approved three articles of Impeachment: obstruction of justice, misuse of federal agencies and defying the authority of Congress. Before Congress could impeach him, however, President Nixon announced that he would resign. His Vice-President, Gerald Ford, took over his office, and, to the distaste of many Americans, pardoned Nixon immediately.

Popular Culture:

