

The History of the 1960s: The End of Innocence!

The 1960s started off as the dawn of a golden age to most Americans. On January 20, 1961, the handsome and charismatic John F. Kennedy became president of the United States. His confidence, as one historian put it, ***“that the government possessed big answers to big problems”*** seemed to set the tone for the rest of the decade. However, that golden age never materialized. On the contrary, by the end of the 1960s, it seemed that the nation was falling apart. Lyndon Johnson’s ***“Great Society”*** splintered as the Democratic Party itself split and America became increasingly enmeshed in the Vietnam War.

The Great Society:

During his presidential campaign in 1960, John F. Kennedy had promised the most ambitious domestic agenda since FDR’s New Deal. He called it the ***“New Frontier,”*** a package of laws and reforms that sought to eliminate injustice and inequality in the United States. But the ***New Frontier*** ran into problems right away.

The Democrats’ Congressional majority depended on a group of Southerners who loathed the plan’s interventionist liberalism and did all they could to block it. The failed Bay of Pigs invasion and the subsequent Cuban Missile Crisis was another disaster for Kennedy.

The Bay of Pigs was a failed landing operation on the Southwest coast of Cuba, by those opposing President Fidel Castro. This was funded by the Americans and led to major changes in the international relations between Cuba, the United States and the Soviet Union.

The Cuban Missile Crisis which occurred over 4 days in November 1962, was a confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, which quickly turned into an international crisis when the United States’ deployment of missiles in Italy and Turkey, were match by Soviet deployments of similar ballistic missiles in Cuba. The confrontation is considered the closest the Cold War came to escalating into a full-scale nuclear war.

It was not until 1964, after Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963, that President Lyndon B. Johnson could muster the political capital to enact his own expansive program of reforms. That year, Johnson declared that he would make the United States into a ***“Great Society”*** in which poverty and racial injustice had no place. He developed a set of programs that would give poor people ***“a hand up, not a handout.”*** These included ***Medicare*** and ***Medicaid***, which helped elderly and low-

income people pay for health care, **Head Start**, which prepared young children for school and a **Job Corps** that trained unskilled workers for jobs in the de-industrializing economy.

Meanwhile, Johnson's **Office of Economic Opportunity** encouraged disadvantaged people to participate in the design and implementation of the government's programs on their behalf, while his **Model Cities** program offered federal subsidies for urban redevelopment and community projects.

All of these various programs within Johnson's "Great Society" portfolio, became the basis of, what became known as, the "**War on Poverty**".

The War in Vietnam:

Unfortunately, the **War on Poverty** was expensive...too expensive, especially as the war in Vietnam became the government's top priority. There was simply not enough money to pay for the **War on Poverty** and the **Vietnam War**. The conflict in Southeast Asia had been going on since the 1950s, and President Johnson had inherited a substantial American commitment to aid anti-communist South Vietnam. Soon after he took office, he escalated that aid commitment into a full-scale war. In 1964, Congress authorized the president to take "**all necessary measures**" to protect American soldiers and their allies from Communist North Vietnam's Viet Cong soldiers. Within days, the draft began in America. Overnight, young men who were too young to vote, found themselves on the way to Vietnam, to fight an unknown enemy.

The Vietnam war dragged on until 1973, and it divided the nation. Some young people took to the streets in protest, while others fled to Canada to avoid the draft. Meanwhile, many of their parents and peers formed a "**silent majority**" in **support** of the war.

The Fight for Civil Rights:

The struggle for civil rights joined the mainstream in the '60s when four black students sat down at a whites-only lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, in February 1960 and refused to leave. Their movement spread! Hundreds of demonstrators went back to that lunch counter every day, and tens of thousands clogged segregated restaurants and shops across the upper Southern states, including North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia and Kentucky. The protesters drew the nation's attention to the injustice, brutality and capriciousness that characterized the Jim Crow laws (the name given to the laws instigated by the Southern states to allow segregation).

In general, the federal government stayed out of the Civil Rights struggle until 1964, when, finally, President Johnson pushed a **Civil Rights Act** through Congress that prohibited discrimination in public places, gave the Justice Department permission to sue states that discriminated against women and minorities, and promised equal opportunities in the workplace to all. The next year, the **Voting Rights Act** eliminated poll taxes, literacy requirements and other tools that southern whites had traditionally used to keep blacks from voting; despite these laws, the Southern states continued to refuse to allow Blacks to vote.

Sadly none of these laws solved the problems facing Blacks! They did not eliminate systemic racism or poverty and they did not improve the conditions in many black urban neighborhoods. Many black leaders began to rethink their goals, and some, like Malcolm X, embraced a more militant ideology of separatism and self-defense.

The Radicalization of the 1960s:

Just as black power became the new focus of the Civil Rights movement in the mid-1960s, other groups were growing similarly impatient with incremental reforms. Student activists grew more radical. They took over college campuses, organized massive antiwar demonstrations and occupied parks and other public places. Some even made bombs and set campus buildings on fire.

At the same time, young women, who had read Betty Friedan's, **The Feminine Mystique**, celebrated the passage of the **1963 Equal Pay Act** and joined the moderate **National Organization for Women (NOW)**, were also increasingly annoyed with the slow progress of reform. They too became more militant.

The counterculture also seemed to grow more outlandish as the decade wore on. Some young people "dropped out" of political life altogether. These "**Hippies**" grew their hair long and practiced "**free love**." Some moved to communes, away from the turbulence that had come to define everyday life in the 1960s.

The Death of the 1960s:

The optimistic '60s went sour in 1968. That year, the brutal North Vietnamese Tet Offensive convinced many people that the Vietnam War would be impossible to win. The Tet Offensive was a coordinated series of North Vietnamese attacks on more than 100 cities and outposts in South Vietnam. The "offensive" was an attempt to stir up rebellion among the South Vietnamese population and encourage the United States to scale back its involvement in the Vietnam War.

