1 The Sixties Experience

We shall overcome, we shall overcome
We shall overcome some day.
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe
We shall overcome some day.
—"We Shall Overcome" by Zilphia Horton, Frank Hamilton, Guy Carawan, and Pete Seeger. ©

On February 3, 1960, one month after the junior senator from Massachusetts, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, announced his candidacy for President, the *New York Times* reported in a brief, back-page article from Greensboro, North Carolina, "A group of well-dressed Negro college students staged a sitdown strike in a downtown Woolworth store today and vowed to continue it in relays until Negroes were served at the lunch counter."

Ten years later, the *Times* devoted four front-page columns to a lead article headed, "4 Kent State Students Killed by Troops." Most startling of all was the photograph that appeared nationwide of a young woman screaming for help while kneeling over the body of a slain student.

These two events framed the decade of the 1960s. The Greensboro sit-in evolved out of the civil rights activities of the 1950s and was the spark that ignited a wave of student sit-ins across seventy cities of the South. The Kent State killings occurred during one of several hundred campus protests against the American invasion of Cambodia. After the shock of Kent State, and the subsequent deaths of two black students at Jackson State in Mississippi, over 450 college and university campuses shut down—fifty-one of them for the remainder of the academic year—in what proved to be the largest strike action in United States history. An estimated four million students were involved in the protests of May 1970.

Each event represented an important historical and psychological milestone in this era of protest. The Greensboro sit-ins marked the entry of students

into full-scale participation in the civil rights movement. As sociologist Aldon Morris notes,

> Nineteen sixty was the year when thousands of Southern black students at black colleges joined forces with "old movement warriors" and tremendously increased the power of the developing civil rights movement. . . . From the privileged position of hindsight, it is clear that the student sit-ins of 1960 were the introduction to a decade of political turbulence.[1]

Similarly, although antiwar activity continued until the last American troops were brought home from Vietnam in 1973, the Kent State and Jackson State killings marked a psychological turning point in the student revolt. Many students realized for the first time that they could die because of their activism, that their government was capable of gunning them down in cold blood. The contrast between Greensboro and Kent State suggests the scale of change over the course of the decade—Greensboro symbolizing the hope and energy of the early Sixties, Kent State the nightmare of repression and social disintegration.

In between these events, the Sixties were stained by assassinations of public figures like John F. Kennedy, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy. They were years of mass protest, for civil rights and black power, for liberated education, for poor people, women's liberation, gay rights, Chicanos, American Indians, and against the Vietnam war. A host of activist groups of all persuasions materialized, from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and the Women Strike for Peace, to the New Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam (New Mobe), the Weather Underground, the Black Panther party, and the Radicalesbians.

The Sixties' claim for historical distinction rests on the combination of enormous cultural ferment and political upheaval within a single decade. In effect, the Sixties combined qualities of the 1920s and 1930s. Movements of the Sixties converged while grappling with the most pressing and intractable dilemmas of the post-war world—racism and poverty, pervasive dehumanization in the developed world, and Third World liberation. At their revolutionary peak in 1968, these movements sought to launch, in Daniel Cohn-Bendit's words, "an experiment that completely breaks with that society, an experiment . . . which allows a glimpse of a possibility."[2]

The Sixties were also years of enormous musical energy, from the folk revival in Greenwich Village in 1960 to the British invasion in 1963–1964 and

the emergence of rock music in 1965 to the rock festival Age of Aquarius. Marijuana and hallucinogens like LSD were widely used by the young, and sexual experimentation was openly embraced by the youthful counterculture. Scores of underground newspapers appeared across the country, providing a community forum and network for various elements of the Movement. Rules, laws, and social norms changed with staggering speed. Traditional boundaries of acceptable expression were shattered in an enormous burst of innovation and experimentation in literature, theater, and the visual arts. As Michael Arlen described it, the Sixties represented the chaos of a world "coming more and more out from under wraps."[3]

From Martin Luther King's "Now is the time!" to the antiwar cry "Peace Now!" to the counterculture's query "Why wait?", movements of the 1960s were attuned to the present, the immediate. As the forces of change gathered momentum, the sheer barrage of events swept aside time for reflection. The world seemed upside down. Change became the only constant, and deviance became the rule. Sixties troubadour Bob Dylan put the fleeting feeling into his famous song, "The Times They Are A-Changin'."

> The line it is drawn
> The curse it is cast
> The slow one now will
> Later be fast.
> As the present now
> Will later be past
> The order is rapidly fadin'
> And the first one now
> Will later be last
> For the times they are a-changin'.

Although this book focuses on the United States, virtually all aspects of the decade's movements in the United States were echoed throughout the western world. The Sixties were, in brief, the West's "pro-democracy movement"—or at least its first phase. The civil rights movement inspired South African liberationists and the European disarmament movement. The United States and its war in Vietnam became prominent targets for international protest. University campuses in both capitalist and communist systems were the scene of growing student agitation, culminating in the upheavals of 1968. The counterculture spread throughout much of Europe. The women's movement began to emerge

in much of the world at about the same time that it flourished in the United States. Ecology activism set the stage for the West German Green movement that arose in the latter 1970s.

Explaining the Sixties: A Movement Perspective

These tumultuous years have inspired reactions ranging from nostalgic recollection to fierce denunciation. In the heat of the times, many commentators attempted to explain the youthful behavior so strikingly characteristic of the age. Some argued that the values, attitudes, and behavior of young people in the Sixties were the product of immaturity and permissive upbringing. The youth revolt was a passing phenomenon; young people would soon grow up and embrace the society they rebelled against.[4] Others emphasized the distinctive generational socialization of those coming of age during the 1960s—the post-World War II environment and parental influences that encouraged personal honesty and moral antipathy toward discrimination and violence.[5] Each of these explanations contained a kernel of truth. Each observer could point to youthful behavior that corroborated his or her theory. However, each explanation was inevitably colored by the observer's ideological leanings.

Ideology that was sometimes subtle and unobtrusive in early scholarly works on the Sixties became overt and strident as the reformist legacy of that decade became part of the political battlefield of the 1980s. The resurgent American Right focused public discontent on excesses of the past, encompassing both liberal Democratic administrations and Sixties movements in their sights. Sixties-bashing was popularized by figures as diverse as President Ronald Reagan and philosopher Allan Bloom. At the same time, a host of twentieth anniversaries of Sixties events provided a focus for activists' reflection as well as mass media oversimplification.

We may distinguish three basic perspectives on the 1960s that reflect distinct social and political outlooks. Two of these—viewpoints we may call "liberal" and "conservative"—lie within the American political mainstream.[6] Citing factors like early socialization, changes in the institutional environment of American life, or simply the pendulum of history, American liberals tend to see the decade as a time when millions of Americans refused to tolerate the gap between institutional practice and the fundamental American ideals of equal

rights, free speech, and a foreign policy grounded on universal human rights. Inspired by early civil rights activism and Kennedy rhetoric, young people demanded that their country live up to the values they had been taught.

To a considerable degree, the nation responded with liberal institutional reforms. Unprecedented civil rights legislation permanently changed the face of the Old South; the federal government launched a massive assault on poverty and inadequate education, housing, and health care; universities modified their curricular requirements and social regulations; the draft was replaced by a volunteer army; and the War in Vietnam—a tragic mistake in the view of many liberals—finally ground to a halt. In effect, despite mistakes and short-circuited social programs, the system worked.[7] The Sixties were essentially a noble era of reform.

With remarkable success in the mainstream media,[8] contemporary conservative critics have engaged in a sustained assault on the Sixties, determined to roll back its surge of liberal social and foreign policy: aggressive civil rights enforcement, federal involvement in social services for the poor, affirmative action policies, profit-reducing federal regulations, abortion rights, and most notably, public reluctance to support military intervention overseas, the so-called Vietnam syndrome.[9]

Conservatives argue that the liberal policies of the Sixties and the youth revolt were connected, and that both were carried to excess. The youth revolt was essentially apolitical and self-indulgent, spawned by post–World War II affluence and permissive childrearing. Liberal reformers in government and academia legitimized and thereby helped to unleash the self-indulgent impulses of the young. Liberal political values like free speech, equal rights, and individualism were distorted to justify excessive antisocial behavior.[10] During the early to mid-1980s, a handful of former radicals denounced their earlier political stance while embracing the rising tide of Reaganism.[11]

Both interpretations have merit. Liberals can point to significant accomplishments in civil rights and social welfare legislation. There is also ample evidence that many protesters espoused liberal values, denouncing the hypocrisy of government officials. Conservatives can point to flaws in Great Society programs and instances of excessively self-indulgent or violent behavior on the part of the counterculture and New Left.

However, to limit one's concern to the *relative* effectiveness of the era's liberal reforms, or to concentrate on the manifest behavior of young activists while overlooking the crucial events of that time, is to miss entirely the

point of the 1960s revolt. Since both are fully grounded in mainstream institutions, neither perspective can adequately explain movements that launched a fundamental critique of those very institutions.

A third view, and one with many variants, has arisen from within the 1960s movements themselves, and has emerged in a host of books that assess distinct movements or recount personal voyages through the Sixties. This view is grounded in the *experience* of the decade's movements and the hard lessons learned about modern America. For many, especially those who were young during that time, the experiences of the Sixties were a formative political education that taught not only painful lessons about American institutions but lessons about themselves.

What can be learned from a systematic review of the Sixties experience? First, young people need to understand, rather than ignore or imitate, the movements of the 1960s—where they came from, how they evolved, and why they evolved as they did. Second, by examining the connections among the movements of that time, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of the meaning of the 1960s in history. And third, the experiences of Sixties movements can provide future movements of human liberation with important lessons about the American political system and its potential for change.

What became known simply as the Movement began with two proactive struggles for change—the civil rights movement and the student New Left. Both were rooted in the postwar world of the 1950s. Each contained an expressive or prefigurative strain—an effort to build and enjoy new democratic social relationships—within an instrumental or political strain aimed at transforming American society.[12] The electric combination of expressive and instrumental strains is one main reason for the enormous energy unleashed during the decade.

The two groups most synonymous with youthful Sixties activism, SNCC and SDS, were acutely affected by the tensions between these two strains. Both expressed an instinctive mistrust of authoritarian rule and hierarchy, a need for loving connection with others, and an emphasis on individual creativity and integrity. These values not only foreshadowed what a "post-revolutionary" America should look like, but they prescribed how the movement to change America should go about this instrumental task. Therein lay the fundamental dilemmas that confronted all movements of the 1960s: how to effect change on a national scale through movements founded on personal relationships and