# 1960s

### Politics

Americans loved handsome John F. Kennedy, his beautiful family, and the young intellectuals he surrounded himself with in his administration. They believed in his program, **The New Frontier,**which promised equality, civil rights, aid to the poor, and employment.

This proved a lot harder to deliver than to say. Perhaps his greatest successes are the ones that still exist today: the space program (landing on the moon was a new imperialist trip.) and the **Peace Corps,**whichwas actually begun to counter communism. Who better to fight it than some starry-eyed, intelligent, determined young people bringing social programs and the fruits of capitalism?

JFK's presidency also saw some gains for women's and African Americans' rights. The **Equal Pay Act**was enacted in 1963 (forcing employers to pay men and women equal wages) and the **Civil Rights Act of 1964**(Kennedy's request of Congress, but LBJ's success) outlawed segregation in allpublic facilities.

Perhaps Kennedy, given enough time, might have delivered his New Frontier. In 1963, however, **Lee Harvey Oswald**killed the president as he drove past in an open-topped car. All of America mourned, and worried about the kind of violence this foretold: the 60s would be a decade filled with tragic assassinations.

**Lyndon B. Johnson,**the vice president, took over—and then won in his own right in the election of 1964. He, too, had a big plan for society—what he called **The Great Society**plan. His idea was to end poverty, cut income taxes, expand civil rights, and create a utopian society of perfect equality. This was a whopper of a brainchild, calling for more government change and power than had been seen since the New Deal.

He gave teeth to the Civil Rights Act by enacting the **Equal Employment Opportunity Commission**to make doubly sure people stopped discriminating against black job applicants, and he signed the **Voting Rights Act of 1965**to crack down on the southern states that still refused to let blacks vote.

Then, Johnson announced a full-scale **War on Poverty.**His **Economic Opportunity Act**gave some 1 billion dollars to poor relief, **Project Head Start**and **Upward Bound**gave poor children better education systems, and**Job Corps**trained them to obtain better jobs. Believing that Americans had a social duty to each other,**Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA)**was like a local Peace Corps, helping enact all kinds of social programs, and **Legal Services for the Poor**gave poor people free legal counseling. The **Department of Housing and Urban Development**countered "white flight" by created federally funded "project" housing.

The **Immigration Act of 1965**finally repealed the quotas that had been established in the 1920s. Millions more Asian and Latin American immigrants arrived. The **National Endowment for the Humanities**funded artists, writers, and other cultural leaders. The **Department of Transportation**gave funds to universities and passed laws to protect consumers and the environment.

The problem, though, was that a lot of people were still against these kinds of changes. Johnson would especially face huge opposition in the South for his civil rights legislation—so much so that the party would be split, allowing Republican **Richard Nixon**to take advantage and win the next presidency.

The problem, Southerners explained, was that the Civil Rights Movement had gotten out of control…

### The Civil Rights Movement

The Civil Rights Movement entered the 1960s at "full steam ahead." The sit-ins and other peaceful protests continued—and, this time, whitepeople began to join the movement. The **Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)**was created by both blacks and whites, and announced the **Freedom Summer.**Hundreds of blacks and whites—mostly youths and students—boarded buses and headed to the South, dedicated to show their support for de-segregation and give blacks the vote.

They were greeted with firebombs, state troopers, local police, fire hoses, and intimidation. The federal government, thankfully, showed its support by sending federal marshals to protect them. The **Ku Klux Klan**was alive and well, however, and it had a heyday targeting black "upstarts" and their white assistants. It wasn't only the Klan that proved violent—southern politicians, policemen, firemen, and random locals turned the peaceful movement brutal.

In **Birmingham,**the police turned dogs, fire hoses, and cattle prods on a peaceful protest. In **Selma,**state police mocked, beat, and threw things at protesters. In Mississippi, three civil rights workers—two whites and one black—were murdered by a posse that included local policemen.

For many blacks, this seemed to prove that the Civil Rights Movement wasn't working. Many felt that the problem was MLK and his whole "nonresistant" ideology. If someone slapped their faces, were they simply supposed to turn the other cheek? Or was it time to combat violence with violence?

A **Black Power**movement arose, led by a number of black leaders who advocated **black supremacy.**Blacks weren't equalto whites, they argued—they were superior.The black community therefore needed to stop trying to work with whites, and instead focus on building their own, more powerful society.

Leaders of this movement included **Malcolm X,**who called MLK a "chump," and **Stokely Carmichael,**who left SNCC to join the **Black Panther Party.**This collection of young black men based in Oakland felt that the worst enemies of the black community were policemen. They carried guns around with them and, when confronted by police, countered with violence and gunfire. Yet the Panthers developed an unnecessarily bad reputation from badly frightened whites—they weren't onlyabout guns. They also invited women to join their revolutionary movement, and established educational programs for young black children, insisting that education was the real key to improvement.

From 1964 to 1968, the **"Long Hot Summers"**kicked off. Race riots erupted in LA, Chicago, and Atlanta. Black neighborhoods were attacked, white neighborhoods were attacked, businesses of all kinds had their windows shattered and their things looted—it seemed as though law and order had disintegrated into nothingness.

To some, the Civil Rights Movement appeared to have worked—blacks had gained a voice, strong new legislation, and successful de-segregation. To others, it had pathetically failed, and needed a new surge of power and violence. To yet others, it had collapsed into savagery. Many middle-class, white Americans looked around at the Black Panthers and the hippies and the Vietnam protesters and said "HEY. Where is myAmerica?" They would refer to themselves as the "**forgotten Americans,**" and their power at the polls would soon be noted…

### The New Left and the Counterculture

It's true that the 1960s started social eruptions everywhere. When Civil Rights movements weren't shocking people, student and youth movements were.The Baby Boomers were arriving in college. Additionally, they were realizing that they were numerous…not to mention sick of being told what to do by their conservative elders. They wanted to change America—and what better time to start than a new decade?

In 1962, **Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)**issued their **Port Huron Statement,**announcing the rise of a **New Left.**The "Old Left" had been some of their moms and dads, as well as leaders they admired—including communists like Che Guevara. They had lost out: they had been weeded out by McCarthyism, silenced, or retreated into the happy American Dream. The New Left vowed it wouldn't shut its mouth and don a gray flannel suit.

It would make itself heard, fight against poverty and for equality and civil rights. Many SDS students joined the Freedom Summer. Many returned to campus afterwards feeling hard-boiled and ready for action, and many of these happened to be at UC Berkeley. When the UC Regents tried to silence their political activism, they launched the **Free Speech Movement,**declaring their right to protest on campuses everywhere.

The FSM was like a candle lit at the end of a gunpowder trail. Student protests began exploding all across the nation and even the world. As the Vietnam War became dirtier (we'll go into this a little later) those merged with anti-war protests, and students banded together to burn draft cards and sing songs of peace.

Many students and other young people began to take their rebellion against authority even further. It became a kind of ideology, a whole new way of living life however the heck you wanted. They called themselves **hippies,**and declared themselves part of the **Counterculture.**They grew their hair long, wore tie dye (or nothing at all), smoked a lot of weed and dropped a lot of acid, and lived in communes where they shared everything: food, work, drugs, and sex.

The irony is that while this started off as a kind of anti-culture, it soon went mainstream. Soon, every young, wealthy, middle class kid who obeyed his curfew and ate his vitamins was blaring Jimi Hendrix or the Rolling Stones, dressing in bell-bottoms, and telling his mom to "be groovy."

Remember the Victorian generation, and how shocked they were at their sons and daughters who drove off in fast cars and smooched in the back seats? The same thing happened with the 1950s parents, the generation who had been through depression and war, when it saw its kids rolling around in parks and talking about "free love" and "peace, man." Was all of America going totally and utterly bonkers?

### The Women's Movement

All these movements and changes also excited some groups. Many women saw all this as a big opportunity. Their involvement in the Civil Rights and student movements were totally empowering. They felt inspired by being engines for change and reform, just like the women of the 19th century.

However, they also noticed something a little strange. In all these "revolutions," they weren't given equal roles. They were expected to serve the coffee, bake the cupcakes, and rub the shoulders of the Men Who Made Decisions. Sure, the counterculture had given them new sexual power, making it suddenly "groovy" for women to try "free love" and sexual experimentation. Sure, the **Pill**that came out in 1960 suddenly made it a whole lot safer to have sex, too. Yet they were realizing that the "feminine mystique" was even creeping into the revolutions—and that was radically unfair.

By "feminine mystique," these women were referring to an idea coined by **Betty Friedan**in her extremely popular book, **The Feminine Mystique,**published in 1965. That book was the first to have the guts to say "Hey, women? Are you insanely bored living in your suburban homes? Do you wish to God you could do something else? Does picking your kids up from school, cooking the spaghetti, and washing your husband's undies fulfill you?" The book argued that the whole myth that this wasenough for women was called the "feminine mystique." It urged women to believe that it was acceptableto look for more, and that they were living in a world of oppression.

The weird thing is that after the vote in 1920, the women's movement had lost steam. In the 1960s, a number of women decided it was time to recharge the batteries and push for all the things women were still denied: equal jobs, equal pay, and equal respect. Friedan created the **National Organization for Women**in 1966 to fight for new legislation for women's rights. The **Feminist Movement**would kick off in the '70s, as women fought for the**Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)**and abortion rights in **Roe v. Wade.**

Before we come to the 1970s and the movements that spilled over into that decade, however, we need to address that giant cloud that perpetually loomed above the decade of the 1960s: the **Vietnam War.**Tragedy, disillusion, protest, and a new, jaded distrust of American government…these were the wins of that "hot fight" in a "Cold War"

### Vietnam

Remember how the US had put Diem in power, even though he was corrupt? Bad news: North Vietnam went communist, and Diem was so corrupt that many South Vietnamese, called the **Viet Cong,**joined the Communist cause and received aid from the North.

The US was determined notto let this happen. Countries seemed to be falling before the Communist scythe (its actual symbol) like a field of wheat. If Vietnam fell, the US was sure that the whole rest of South Asia would follow. LBJ passed the **Tonkin Gulf Resolution,**announcing that the president was allowed to take any measure(read: bombs, guns, men, you name it) to protect American interests in Southeast Asia.

The first thing he thought "necessary" was flooding the region with American troops. Under the policy of "**Americanization,**" American soldiers came in and started replacing South Vietnamese soldiers. Americans started becoming restive, especially when the draft began. Many people had no clue why Americans were there at all. Was far-away Vietnam a problem? Didn't they have their own problems? Many American men burned their draft cards, joined protest movements, or even ran off to Canada.

"No, it's fine," the government promised. "We're totally winning, and then that area will be magically commie-free." However, that promise rang hollow when the Vietnamese launched the **Tet Offensive**in 1968. No, it wasn't an actual defeat for the Americans—but it did inflict huge damage. Plus, it showed that the Vietnamese communists were far from being beaten, and were in fact strong and well-organized. It was a huge blow to a country that prided itself on being a superpower—how could this little Third World gnatbe so strong?

The reality was that Americans had two things working against them: first, they didn't know the land. Vietnam was full of jungles and swamps that totally frightened and confused Americas (and also made them sick). Of course, the Vietnamese themselves knew it as well as we know our city streets.

The second problem was that Americans weren't exactly winning the "**hearts and minds"**of the Vietnamese people, like they wanted. They spewed **Agent Orange**from helicopters to destroy forests and crops; they spewed**napalm**on people to burn their skins; they had **search and destroy missions** in which they went into villages, searched out the communists, and then destroyed the whole place. Was it any wonder the Vietnamese ran off to the communists for help?

Even the Americans were repulsed by American tactics. When the **Mai Lai Massacre**story became public in 1968, the protest movements found themselves with fresh ammo. They saw pictures of the torture and massacre U.S. soldiers had inflicted on villagers—including old men, women, and children, in a small Vietnamese village. "Where was the America of peace and justice," people wondered. "Where was the 'light of democracy'?"

LBJ announced that he wouldn't run for re-election. He was cowed by the direction the war had taken. Violence seemed to be consuming America from the inside out and outside in. As if all the Civil Rights stuff and Vietnam protests weren't enough, both MLK and presidential candidate **Robert Kennedy**were assassinated in 1968. Where was American heading?

"To a bad, bad place," said Richard Nixon. "Let me help restore order." Nixon took advantage of the splintering of the Democratic Party. Not only had it turned the south against itself with its civil rights legislation, but it even turned policemen on the young members who came to its **Chicago Convention**to protest. Yeah…using sticks to beat on members who are already mad at you is probablynot the best idea.

The Republican Nixon seemed to many Americans like a return to normalcy and social control. That's exactly what he promised, and his **Southern Strategy**—securing white Democratic support by promising an end to the Civil Rights mess—worked well. He won the election of 1968.

### Nixon and the End of the War

First, Nixon promised to take America out of the war. He proposed a policy of **Vietnamization.**That's right, the opposite of "Americanization": replace American troops with Vietnamese ones. Sure enough, he did start taking troops out—but he also starting bombing even more intensely, especially in Cambodia.

Finally, **Henry Kissinger**negotiated a peace treaty with the North Vietnamese in 1973. It definitely wasn't a victory. First, the communists were still there. Secondly, the peace between North and South crumbled to bits as soon as American troops left. The North Vietnamese sacked Saigon (the southern capital) and Vietnam came under communist rule.

Well, that was that, thought Congress. It had tried and it had failed. In 1973, it passed the **War Resolution,**revoking the Tonkin Resolution and making sure that no future president could make undeclared war again. In future, allwar had to be affirmed by Congress.

Nixon's foreign policy was called **détente.**That's a fancy French word that basically means "ease." The whole idea was to stop trying to resolve situations with "hot wars," and instead work on talking to each other, understanding each other, and making compromises and deals. The **Nixon Doctrine**gave proof of these intentions: it said that instead of using men with guns to fight its battles, the US would rely on diplomats and alliances.

Then, in 1972, the US and Russia signed the **Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT),**promising to slow their crazy arms race and reduce their nuke stockpiles. Americans began to breathe a little easier. It no longer seemed like Russian missiles were pointed at their faces, waiting for them to accidentally lock themselves out of their suburban bomb shelters. The "Cold War" would slowly melt in the 70s and 80s.

## Sample Questions

1. Who were the "forgotten Americans"?

A) The middle class  
B) The religious right  
C) The working class  
D) African Americans  
E) Women

The correct answer is (A).

Ironic, right? Throughout most of American history, it's the white middle class that is the only "remembered" group of Americans. However, we're talking about the '60s: a period when all the previously "forgotten" Americans began to demand attention and rights. The whole reason the middle class started to call itself "forgotten" is because it insisted that it, as the quiescent, wealthy, law-abiding, non-protesting, tax-paying, traditional group, needed to be remembered, protected, and catered to in the midst of all the upheaval.

2. When first created, the "New Left" was composed primarily of

A) disillusioned members of the "Old Left" of socialists and communists  
B) hippies and other adherents to the counter-culture  
C) African Americans and their white supporters in the Civil Rights movement  
D) students who advocated broader liberal reform  
E) women, led by Betty Friedan

The correct answer is (E).

A lot of young, intelligent students looked at the way socialism and communism had been treated in America, and shook their heads. That "Old Left" was dead as a doornail—but American society still needed reform. Plus, it needed reforms for more than just the working class (the focus of socialism and communism). The New Left focused on all sorts of minority groups, and envisioned a whole new, liberal, trulydemocratic society. Women, African Americans, hippies, and all other sorts joined—but the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) was first.