

Washington that in desperation, Nixon might resort to military force to stave off his removal from office, either by provoking war abroad or by staging a military coup at home. Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger went so far as to instruct the U.S. military commanders not to respond to a call from the president for military action without first clearing it with him.⁸¹

In the end, Nixon went quietly, resigning on August 9. The country breathed a collective sigh of relief at the conclusion of its worst constitutional crisis since the Civil War. With Nixon gone, with direct American involvement in the war in Vietnam concluded, with campus protest and racial rioting fading into unpleasant memory, many Americans hoped that August 1974 would mark a new beginning for the nation, a time of healing, and an end to discord. As President Gerald Ford declared upon taking the oath of office as thirty-eighth president of the United States, "our long national nightmare is over."⁸²

He proved mistaken.

CONCLUSION

Everything Changed

THE PAST IS NEVER DEAD. IT'S NOT EVEN PAST.
—William Faulkner¹

There are moments in history after which it seemed as if "everything changed." For Americans, the firing on Fort Sumter in 1861 was one such moment, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 another. The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, is the most recent example.

The "Long 1960s"—from the mid-1950s through the early 1970s—constituted another turning point, albeit a more extended "moment," after which everything seemed different. For better or worse, Americans live in a post-'60s world, and there is no going back, any more than the lost world of the antebellum South could have been restored after 1865, for all the "lost cause" sentiment and "states rights" rhetoric that found expression in the century that followed.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, there remains a lively contest over the meanings of the 1960s. The battle is joined by Christian conservatives and homosexual activists, by proponents of English only and defenders of bilingual education, by ardent feminists and defenders of the "traditional" family, by advocates of pre-emptive war against hostile nations and critics of U.S. power and motives, by scholars who view America's past through the prism of multiculturalism and gender and those who argue that the thought and achievements of great national leaders ought to be the main focus of historical study.

Every Presidential election since 1992 has served as a referendum on current American attitudes toward the '60s. Bill Clinton was the first baby boomer to run for president as the candidate of a major political party, running against the incumbent President George H. W. Bush, a World War II veteran. In addition to persuading voters that he had responsible alternatives to offer in domestic and foreign policy, Bill Clinton also had to answer for his possible use of marijuana while an undergraduate, his opposition to

the war in Vietnam, and his successful avoidance of the draft. His wife, Hillary Rodham Clinton, also came under attack for her feminist views (her expressed reluctance to stay home and bake cookies instead of pursuing her own career as a lawyer surfaced as a campaign issue). In a three-way race, a plurality of Americans decided to give the nod to the baby boomer, notwithstanding his '60s-era baggage (afterward Richard Nixon complained that Clinton's election proved "it was all right to be against the goddamned war."). In 1996, when Clinton ran against another World War II veteran, Senator Bob Dole, he won by a more decisive margin. But the '60s issue would not go away, particularly after Republicans in Congress seized upon President Clinton's marital infidelities as an impeachable issue. Clinton had his own sins to answer for, but he carried the burden in the eyes of some for the sexual license and moral permissiveness of the years when he came of age.

The next election cycle pit two baby boomers, Vice President Al Gore and George W. Bush, against each other. Gore did not have the same liabilities as Bill Clinton when it came to his military service, for although he opposed the war, he had served in Vietnam as a combat photographer. His opponent, George W. Bush, has served in the Texas Air National Guard during the Vietnam War, a posting which kept him in the United States, and on light duty. And no one had ever accused Al Gore of being a sexual libertine. But he was never able to escape the shadow of the Clinton impeachment, and George W. Bush's ostentatious display of religious piety and promise to restore morality to the Oval Office, struck a resonant chord with many Americans. Still, in terms of the popular vote, the election was hardly a decisive repudiation of the Clinton legacy (and, indeed, in his last months in office, Clinton's popularity in public opinion polls soared).

Then came 9/11 and a "war on terror" that led first to Afghanistan, and then to Iraq. There were echoes of the Tonkin Gulf resolution in the unanimity with which Congress passed the resolution authorizing President Bush to use force in his quest to counter the threat he said was posed by Saddam Hussein's "weapons of mass destruction" (and when those weapons turned out not to exist, the situation was also reminiscent of the distortions that had framed the debate over the Tonkin Gulf incident back in 1964).

There were also major differences evident between the two wars. Americans did not fear an attack on their own country during the Vietnam War; after the attack on the World Trade Center, the comforting assurance of the invulnerability of the "homeland" to any attack short of a full-scale nuclear exchange between the superpowers was no longer possible to sustain. There was protest against the Bush administration's foreign policies, including massive demonstrations preceding the attack on Iraq. But leading Democrats held back, fearful of being accused of being soft on terrorism, and without a military draft in the background, college campuses were not the centers of antiwar protest they had been in the '60s.

Once again in 2004, memories of the '60s were used as political weapons. Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry hoped to capitalize on his record as a wounded and decorated veteran of the Vietnam War to neutralize George W. Bush's advantage as a tough-talking "war president." Instead, his Republican opponents managed to turn Kerry's wartime service into a political liability, questioning whether he deserved the medals he had received, and denouncing his subsequent involvement with Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Kerry's initial support for the Iraq War, which may have seemed a shrewd move in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, now hampered his ability to challenge the incumbent President's policies. In 1992 and 1996, the first two elections since the fall of the Soviet Union, Americans indicated that a '60s war-protester was an acceptable choice as Commander-in-Chief, but in 2004, the first election since the collapse of the World Trade Center, the rules had clearly changed.

Or some of the rules. Policymakers in the Bush administration clearly wanted memories of the Vietnam War to be buried forever. They wanted the President to be free to make use of America's massive military power in bold, unilateral initiatives overseas, and they expected the country to rally behind him. "United We Stand" was the watchword spread on billboards and bumper stickers. But it turned out that the unity proclaimed in the aftermath of 9/11 would hold only so long as the administration observed the main political lesson of the Vietnam era: Americans are prepared to fight short, decisive wars for clearly defined objectives. Long, bloody wars without clear objectives or "exit strategies" destroy presidential mandates. By 2006, the war in Iraq was more unpopular than the Vietnam War had been in the immediate aftermath of the 1968 Tet Offensive. As far as American foreign policy was concerned, the '60s weren't over yet.²

Although Democrats and Republicans traded off control of the White House in the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the new century, there was no denying that the conservative wing of the Republican Party emerged as the major political force in post-'60s American politics. By the end of the 1970s, as the New Left and civil rights insurgencies lost numbers and energy, the Right could boast the largest and best-financed grassroots force in the land. Its influence, particularly among business executives and evangelical Protestants, did much to propel Ronald Reagan, George Bush, Sr. and George W. Bush into the White House and to establish a handful of conservative opinions as the conventional wisdom of American politics: antipoverty programs do not help the poor; taxes should always be lowered; "preferential treatment" for minorities is wrong; business is overregulated; and the size of government ought to be reduced—in every area but the military.

Widely blamed for the turmoil of the late '60s, liberals were unable to regain the aura of a political force that could master the future. Instead, their very name became grist for ridicule by those on the Right seeking to put an

opponent on the defensive. At the beginning of the new century, no Republican and only a handful of Democrats embraced it. Although Bill Clinton was attacked as a "liberal" throughout his presidency, two of his major accomplishments in office were ones that conservatives had long advocated: a balanced budget and the end of guaranteed welfare payments to single mothers with small children.

The coalition of wage earners and intellectuals of all races and most regions that Franklin D. Roosevelt forged in the 1930s cracked apart during the late '60s and has not been rebuilt. That alliance was forged during a period of economic growth and patriotic unity that ended in the debacle of Vietnam. Taking its place on the left of American politics was a melange of social movements—feminist, gay and lesbian, black nationalist, Mexican American, environmentalist—that swelled in size and became skilled at defending the rights and cultural identities of people who, before the '60s, had been scorned or ignored. But conservatives usually set the terms of debate about economic and social policy—and usually wielded a voting majority on the Supreme Court, as the 5-4 ruling that resolved the 2000 election for George W. Bush made spectacularly clear.

The Right, however, did not have everything its own way in politics. Notwithstanding the resentment of "big government," millions of Americans clung fiercely to benefits they received as a result of programs initiated by liberal Democrats in the 1960s and early '70s: Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps, the Occupational Health and Safety Act, the Higher Education Act (which mandates equal treatment for women), and the Environmental Protection Agency. In fact, protecting the environment quickly became one '60s cause that no politician could afford to oppose—even though some on the Right grumbled, in the teeth of scientific consensus, that the danger of global warming was much exaggerated.

What is more, conservatives had little success in reversing larger social changes that the New Left and the youth culture had helped set in motion. The most obvious legacy was that of issues radical feminists made prominent at the end of the '60s. The central tenet of their ideology was that "the personal is political." The most intimate details of private life—housework and child care, sexuality and childbirth—were viewed as fundamentally linked to social and political power. By the mid-'70s, the media had stopped calling feminists "bra burners" and were giving their demands a respectful hearing. Mainstream politicians refused, despite the pleas of a growing right-to-life movement, to negate the Supreme Court's 1973 ruling in *Roe v. Wade* that essentially legalized abortion.

Thirty years later, feminists often had to defend themselves against charges that they were out to destroy "family values." But the embattled reputation of their movement obscured the fact that relationships between the genders had changed in fundamental ways during the last third of the cen-

tury. Most young women, at least in the middle class, expected to have access to the same careers and to receive the same compensation as men. It was no longer surprising to see women leaders in formerly "men's" fields like television production (Oprah Winfrey), diplomacy (Secretaries of State Madeleine Albright and Condoleezza Rice), or the Supreme Court (Justices Sandra Day O'Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsburg). Even conservative Republicans recruited female candidates and urged them to be as aggressive on the stump as men. The idea that husbands and wives (or unmarried partners) should share the housework and child rearing was all but universally accepted. So were suits for sexual harassment, which was not even considered a crime until the 1970s. Near the end of the century, a majority of American women under 30 agreed, in a national poll, that "The women's movement has made your life better."⁴ It was as if U.S. society had been waiting for decades, with mounting nervousness and impatience, for some group to have the courage to state the obvious about problems between the sexes.

Personal issues not directly linked to women's equality remained more controversial—such as the teaching of sex education in public schools and tolerance toward homosexuals in the military and ministry. Many American parents wanted to retain a sphere of privacy about intimate matters and feared that gays and lesbians were out to "convert" the young. Still, the fact that millions of homosexuals were open about their sexual identity—and had a sizable movement to lobby for their interests—was a remarkable change from the Eisenhower years when police routinely raided gay bars and every state declared "sodomy" illegal.⁵

What about the black freedom movement, inspiration for all the "liberations" that followed? After the black insurgency split into integrationist and nationalist camps late in the '60s, its power and élan gradually declined. During the next decades, black activists railed against the Right's ability to dismiss their cause as a selfish "special interest" but were unable to regain the political momentum. Meanwhile, deteriorating schools, inadequate transportation, and the disappearance of urban manufacturing jobs conspired to leave the black poor in worse shape than they had been during the heyday of the movement. By century's end, "benign neglect" of the inner city had become, in fact if not rhetoric, the unofficial policy of the nation.

This is a dismal portrait. But it conceals a number of more encouraging realities. The landmark civil rights bills passed by lawmakers under the influence of the black freedom movement proved irreversible, and they helped to pry open opportunities for millions of African Americans. Since the '60s, the number of black political officials, elected and appointed, skyrocketed; their ranks included mayors of the biggest cities, a southern governor, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who later became Secretary of State. By the mid-1990s, young blacks were graduating from high school at the

same rate as whites (albeit usually from schools with fewer resources). With the aid of affirmative action, black graduates enjoyed access to every university in the land. Middle-class African Americans (the name itself popularized by Jesse Jackson, King's former lieutenant) no longer occupied a mere beachhead on a vast Euro-American shore. They owned businesses and practiced professions in totals far beyond what earlier generations had achieved.⁶

For a growing number of black Americans, the cultural mainstream no longer seemed as alien as it had during the era of Jim Crow. In the 1990s, major newspapers ran cheery features about Kwanzaa alongside ones on other "ethnic" traditions, big corporations sponsored Kwanzaa Expos, and President Bill Clinton hailed "the meaning and energy of this inspiring festival." A new generation of black politicians, who had often attended integrated schools, won votes from whites and new immigrants by speaking less about racism and more about promoting business and reforming education. Even hip-hop music, a quintessential creation of "the hood," gained a huge following among nonblacks, and spawned Eminem, a vengeful white lyricist whose popularity crossed racial lines.⁷

It was more difficult to tell how much racial attitudes had changed since the '60s. Certainly, Americans had not attained the paradise of racial tolerance that white and black organizers dreamed about in the early years of the freedom movement. Most people socialized only within their own race, and blacks remained deeply suspicious of law enforcement, even when police departments were thoroughly integrated.

Meanwhile, old-fashioned styles of racism continued to fester. Numbers of real estate agents still steered black tenants away from white neighborhoods, and both talk radio and the Internet hummed with "darky jokes" and other forms of racist banter. In 1994 two conservatives wrote a best-selling book that argued, in sober tones, that African Americans were genetically less intelligent than whites and Asians.⁸ In response, some black nationalists railed against "white devils," whom they accused of spreading AIDS and crack cocaine to inner-city neighborhoods.

Fortunately, millions of Americans rejected such talk. They made friends across the color line, particularly at work, and enjoyed a popular culture whose relaxed, multiracial character defied grim descriptions of a country deeply divided in the bad old ways. The study of the history and culture of minority groups became a staple of public and private education, especially in metropolitan areas. And a growing number of voices opposed viewing all issues, political and personal, through a racial mirror in which one must think and act as either black or white. In 1997, the sociologist Orlando Patterson, an immigrant from Jamaica, called on his fellow blacks to commit themselves anew to the "glorious ideal of America as the 'beloved community': free, egalitarian, and as integrated in its social life as it already is in the triumphant

global culture that Afro-Americans have done so much to fashion."⁹ But if black people followed his advice, would Americans of other races follow?

While activists, politicians, and intellectuals continue to fight over the meaning of the '60s, other Americans retired from the fray. Thousands of military veterans and Robert McNamara, the former defense secretary, made pilgrimages back to Vietnam and were greeted warmly by their erstwhile enemies; Pete Peterson, the first U.S. ambassador to that nation since the war ended, had spent seven years as a POW. Toward the end of his life, George Wallace repeatedly apologized for the harm he caused black Americans. Like Union and Confederate veterans who staged joint reunions at the turn of the last century, such figures seek to end disputes that once set them and their fellow citizens at odds. Fortunately, this time around, abrogating the rights of black citizens has not been the price of reconciliation.

For their part, Americans born since the 1960s have grown up surrounded by a surfeit of images—musical, visual, and literary—that convey the polarized passions of the era but do little to explain them. The '60s hits of Marvin Gaye and James Brown, of the Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan, of Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and the Beatles (not to speak of dozens of less famous artists) supply a mildly stimulating soundtrack that overwhelms memories of cultural and racial conflict. No wonder that when the U.S. Postal Service asked Americans, in 1998, to vote for "the subjects that best commemorate the 1960s," the winners were a trio of cultural products whose enduring popularity (in legend and the marketplace) seems to transcend conflict entirely: the Beatles, Woodstock, and *Star Trek*.¹⁰

One reason why young Americans show little inclination to refight the '60s is that they realize how much the nation has changed. The United States now exhibits a degree of ethnic diversity that defies the biracial model that reigned from the beginnings of the nation through the heyday of the civil rights movement and the backlash against it. Inter marriages—between all combinations of peoples—have steadily increased since the 1960s. In 2000, 6.8 million Americans (two percent of the total population) told the U.S. Census they belonged to more than one race; the government had never before included such an option on its questionnaire.¹¹ Thanks in part to liberalized immigration laws, the numbers of U.S. residents from Central and South America, East and South Asia, and Africa mushroomed during the last third of the twentieth century. The 2000 Census reported there were more Hispanic Americans than black Americans. The Hispanic category itself, invented by federal officials in 1973, is somewhat artificial: What, besides the same mother tongue, does an Argentinian psychoanalyst in Washington, D.C., have in common with a Mexican laborer who crosses the border into California to harvest crops?¹² But, in demographic terms, the United States has, since the '60s, become a different country. The political consequences may

prove significant, as both the massive "Day without Immigrants" demonstrations in the spring of 2006 and Congress's decision to build a wall across the Mexican border suggest.

Newcomers have transformed the human face of the economy: the first language of most meatpackers in Iowa and Kansas is Spanish, immigrants from South Asia drive thousands of New York City taxicabs, and Chinese women are ubiquitous in the garment trades. By 2000, a majority of residents of the nation's one-hundred largest cities hailed from non-European backgrounds. Unlike the European immigrants who flooded into industrial America at the turn of the last century, most newcomers can now stay in more or less constant touch with their homelands. Many travel back and forth on a regular basis. And the influence of Latinos, particularly those from Mexico and Cuba, in politics and popular culture is swiftly growing.¹³ They are a pivotal voting bloc in the populous states of Florida, California, and Texas—and make up about one-third of major league baseball rosters.

The comparative ease with which immigrants and U.S. citizens alike cross borders is but one feature of the global economy whose contours were just coming into view at the end of the 1960s. The quarter-century of growth following World War II delivered secure jobs for millions of Americans at rising wages in big corporations. Increasing numbers of these newly prosperous workers bought homes, paid taxes, and sent their children to colleges where alternative cultures and politics flourished. But after the '60s, most of these workers and their offspring had to adapt, quickly, to an unstable world in which products and labor increasingly cut loose from their national moorings. The rapid computerization of a myriad of tasks also took a toll, even as it made life easier and smoother for many. During the 1970s, the number of long-distance phone calls made in the United States tripled, while the ranks of telephone operators assigned to handle them dropped by 40 percent.¹⁴ A gradual decline in the membership and economic clout of labor unions based in manufacturing, mining, and construction helped stretch the income gap between classes and reminded some historians of conditions during the Gilded Age that followed the Civil War.

Of course, some of the hype about computer capitalism was valid. Fewer Americans needed to work at jobs that were nasty, brutish, and shortened life—even if they still paid a union wage. As information became a commodity of universal value, more and more Americans rushed to learn new skills and subjects; as a result, cultural tolerance probably increased. Thanks to the Internet—created in the late '60s by federal scientists to communicate with each other more efficiently—anyone with a modem could connect to vast storehouses of data. Some who gazed endlessly at their monitors were only pursuing loneliness, but others found new pleasures, profits, or a blend of the two.¹⁵

The visions and perils of globalized capitalism may seem without precedent, but the emerging culture owes a good deal to aspects of the 1960s that

some critics considered selfish and amoral. During the Vietnam War, young rebels had opposed the draft with the cry, "Not with my life you don't" and argued that society should prize the quality of life over laboring diligently for a brighter future. Since then, "postmaterialist values" of individual liberty, self-expression, and sexual relativism have gained around the world—in bad economic times and good.¹⁶ At the start of the twenty-first century, even the Communist rulers of a poor nation like Vietnam were encouraging their people to buy American goods associated with ease and luxury (often marketed by former patriots who had crossed the Pacific and made it rich). The traditional morality of saving, diligence, and sexual self-denial was nearly everywhere on the run.

In the United States, neither the Right nor the Left that emerged from the '60s was overjoyed by the triumph of this kind of "freedom." Conservatives saw moral discipline breaking down under the assault of cyberpornography and the increasing acceptance of homosexuality. Liberals and radicals complained that the wealthy lacked any sense of social responsibility, particularly to their own workers. Neither camp welcomed the fact that the global marketplace was diluting the meaning of American citizenship—although, in contrast to earlier periods, hostility toward new immigrants failed to activate a mass movement.

The amoral economic order did help generate an alternative of sorts in the spiritual realm. The great awakening that began in the '60s gained strength through the rest of the century. Every major world religion achieved a foothold in the United States, and fundamentalists—whether Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu—gained adherents by preaching obeisance to the laws and texts of their faith.¹⁷ New Age religions grew as well, driven by a longing to understand the "inner self" that traditional congregations could not satisfy. For many Americans, writes sociologist Robert Wuthnow, "Faith is no longer something people inherit but something for which they strive."¹⁸

The Civil War of the 1860s was a terrible and humbling experience. As Lincoln suggested in his second inaugural address, delivered in March 1865, it was the price the nation had to pay for the sin of slavery:

Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."¹⁹

Lincoln himself would not live to see the end of the war. One night in early April he had a dream in which he foresaw his own death. A few nights later, on April 14th, 1865—Good Friday on the Christian religious calendar—he was struck down by an assassin's bullet.

On another April evening, 103 years later, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of the possibility of his own death as he addressed a crowd of supporters gathered in a Memphis church. He reflected on the dramatic events of the 1960s, and how glad he was that he had been a part of them. Had he died before the start of the decade, he reminded his audience:

I wouldn't have been around here in 1960, when students all over the South started sitting-in at lunch counters. And I knew as they were sitting in, they were really standing up for the best in the American dream, and taking the whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.²⁰

Lincoln and King were kindred spirits living in kindred eras. They fashioned and spoke a language of civic virtue and redemptive sacrifice that continues to inspire new generations of Americans. We may not envy them for the difficult times in which they lived and died. But we should recognize that it is in just such eras of discord and conflict that Americans have shown themselves most likely to rediscover and live out the best traditions to be found in our national experience.

CRITICAL EVENTS DURING THE LONG 1960S

- 1946 War begins between France and the Viet Minh for control of Vietnam
- 1947 Jackie Robinson becomes first black man to play major league baseball in the twentieth century
- 1948 President Harry S Truman orders desegregation of the military
- 1954 French withdraw from Vietnam; Geneva accords provide for temporary partition of the country into North and South, with the U.S. supporting the latter (the Republic of Vietnam)
In *Brown v. Board of Education*, Supreme Court rules that segregated schools violate the Fourteenth Amendment and are thus unconstitutional
- Elvis Presley releases first record on Sun label
- Senator Joseph McCarthy censured by his colleagues
- 1955 Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott begins
Founding of *National Review*
Merger of American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO); union membership at historic high
Allen Ginsberg reads "Howl" in public for the first time
- 1956 After Supreme Court sides with Montgomery boycotters, buses in that city are desegregated
Dwight Eisenhower wins reelection in a landslide
Soviet armed forces crush the Hungarian revolution
The first enclosed shopping mall opens in Minneapolis