



The War in Vietnam

An American soldier awaits evacuation from Dak To, Vietnam, in November 1967. Heavy American bombing and artillery finally halted the communist offensive at Dak To in the largest battle of the war to that point. The American commander, General William Westmoreland, announced that "the enemy's hopes are bankrupt," but his confidence turned out to be unfounded. (UPI/Bettmann Newsphotos)

CHAPTER 30



The Ordeal of Liberalism



The calm, reassuring presence of Dwight D. Eisenhower seemed perfectly to match the political mood of the 1950s—a mood that combined a desire for domestic stability with a concern for international security. By the end of the decade, however, many Americans were beginning to clamor for a more active and assertive approach to public policy. The United States had, liberals complained, been allowed to “drift.” It was time for an energetic assault on both domestic and world problems. Such sentiments helped produce two presidents whose activism transformed the nature of their office and the thrust of American politics.

Those same sentiments helped make the 1960s one of the most turbulent eras of the twentieth century. For several years after the inauguration of John F. Kennedy as president, the nation seemed to move firmly and confidently to combat the expansion of communism; and it seemed to act decisively to confront its most serious social problems at home: racial inequality, economic deprivation, and others. By 1968, however, the United States was embroiled in a major social, cultural, and political crisis. In extending the containment doctrine to dictate a deepening American involvement in the civil war in Vietnam, the United States was embroiling itself in a conflict it did not fully understand and was ultimately unable to resolve. And in assaulting the problems of racial injustice and poverty, the nation was undertaking a far more difficult and wrenching task than most reformers at first realized. These and other pressures produced social and political turmoil so profound that

those who described them as a “revolution” exaggerated only slightly.

Expanding the Liberal State

The presidency had been growing steadily more important in American public life throughout the twentieth century. The development of atomic weapons—the means of ultimate destruction, which remained (at least in theory) under the personal and exclusive control of the president—added a new dimension to the powers of the office in the 1950s. By 1960, more and more Americans were looking to the presidency as the source of all initiatives and were calling for more assertive leadership. The political scientist Richard Neustadt, for example, published an influential book that year entitled *Presidential Power*, which stressed the importance of presidential action in confronting national problems. Presidents faced many constraints, he argued, but effective presidents must learn to break free of them. Such exhortations found a receptive audience in the two men who served in the White House from 1961 until 1969: John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson.

John Kennedy

The campaign of 1960 produced two young candidates who claimed to offer the nation active leader-

ship. The Republican nomination went almost uncontested to Vice President Richard Nixon, who for the occasion abandoned the strident anticommunism that had characterized his earlier career and adopted a centrist position in favor of moderate reform. The Democrats, in the meantime, emerged from a spirited primary campaign united, somewhat uneasily, behind John Fitzgerald Kennedy, an attractive and articulate senator from Massachusetts who had narrowly missed being the party's vice-presidential candidate in 1956.

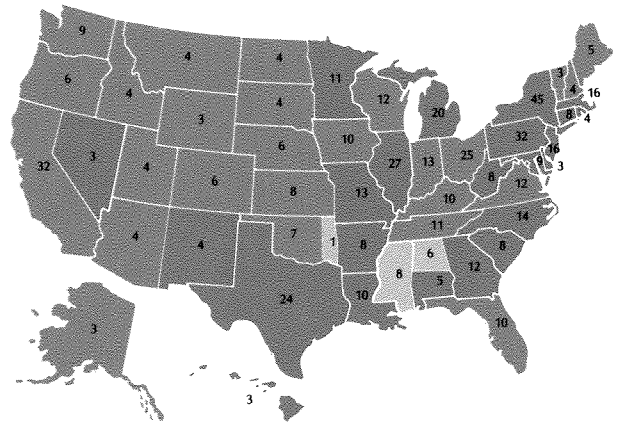
Kennedy's road to national leadership was an unusual one. He was the son of one of the most powerful and controversial public figures of the 1930s: Joseph P. Kennedy, who had made a large personal fortune in the stock market, who had served as the first chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission, who had been the American ambassador to Great Britain in the first years of World War II, and who had transferred his own frustrated ambitions for the presidency to his children. John Kennedy grew up in a world of ease and privilege, although he himself suffered from a series of physical ailments throughout his life. He attended Harvard and then served in the navy during World War II. He attracted attention during the war after the PT boat he commanded was sunk at sea; he was decorated for heroism for his efforts to save members of the crew.

Kennedy returned to Massachusetts after the war and, making liberal use of both his own war record and his family's money, won a seat in Congress in 1946. Six years later, he was elected to the United States Senate, and in 1958 reelected by a record margin. Within days of his triumph, he was planning his campaign for the White House. He had by then attracted considerable national attention for his eloquence, his poise, and what was later widely described as his "charisma." In 1956, he had published a successful book, *Profiles in Courage*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for history and which celebrated American leaders who had displayed notable political bravery. But Kennedy himself had compiled a very cautious and modest political record up to that point and had inspired enthusiasm among relatively few liberals.

His presidential campaign, however, was notable for its strong endorsement of the idea of dynamic governmental activism. Kennedy had read and admired Richard Neustadt's book on the presidency, and he seemed committed to energetic use of the office. He had premised his campaign, he said, "on the single assumption that the American people are

Election of 1960

(64% of electorate voting)



	ELECTORAL VOTE	POPULAR VOTE (%)
John F. Kennedy (Democratic)	303	34,227,096 (49.9)
Richard M. Nixon (Republican)	219	34,108,546 (49.6)
Harry F. Byrd (Dixiecrat)	15	501,643 (0.7)
Other candidates (Socialist Labor; Prohibition; National States Rights, Socialist Workers, Constitution)	—	197,029

uneasy at the present drift in our national course." He was, wrote *New Republic* columnist TRB, "a young man offering positive leadership and presidential power to the uttermost."

He was also a Catholic, a political liability that had almost cost him the nomination and that continued to dog him throughout the campaign. Kennedy compensated for that with a remarkably appealing public image—one that seemed perfectly suited for television—and with an unusually sophisticated and capable campaign. The crucial moment, perhaps, came when he met Vice President Nixon in the first of a series of televised debates. Cool, poised, and relaxed, Kennedy stood in marked contrast to the haggard and somewhat nervous Nixon, who was recovering from an illness. The favorable response Kennedy received from the debate helped propel him to victory.

It was, however, one of the narrowest victories in the history of presidential elections. A vigorous



John Kennedy

The new president and his wife, Jacqueline, attend one of the five balls in Washington marking Kennedy's inauguration in 1961. (Paul Schutzer, *Life Magazine*, © 1961 Time, Inc.)

effort on behalf of Nixon by President Eisenhower in the closing days of the campaign, combined with continuing doubts about Kennedy's youth (he turned forty-three in 1960) and religion, almost enabled the Republicans to close what had at one time been a substantial Democratic lead. But in the end, Kennedy held on to win a tiny plurality of the popular vote—49.9 percent to Nixon's 49.6 percent—and only a slightly more comfortable electoral majority—303 to 219. If a few thousand voters in Illinois and Texas had voted differently, Nixon would have won the election.

The narrowness of Kennedy's victory placed a serious constraint on his ability to accomplish his goals. He had campaigned promising a program of domestic legislation more ambitious than any since the New Deal, a program he described as the "New Frontier." He was able to steer little of it to completion during his presidency.

Kennedy's most serious problem from the beginning was Congress. Although Democrats remained in control of both houses, they owed little to the new president, whose coattails in 1960 had been exceedingly short. Nor did the presence of Democratic majorities ensure a sympathetic reception for reform proposals; those majorities consisted in large part of conservative Southerners, who were far more likely to vote with the Republicans than with Kennedy. Moreover, many of those same Southerners maintained control, by virtue of their seniority, of the most important congressional committees. One after another of Kennedy's legislative proposals, therefore, found themselves hopelessly stalled long before they reached the floor of the House or Senate.

As a result, the president had to look elsewhere for opportunities to display forceful, positive leadership. One such area was the economy, which from the beginning of his administration had been among his primary concerns. Economic growth was sluggish in 1961 when Kennedy entered the White House, with unemployment hovering at about 6 percent of the work force. In addition to such legislative initiatives as requesting tax credits for businesses investing in capital growth, Kennedy attempted to use his executive powers to improve the economy. With congressional approval, he initiated a series of tariff negotiations with foreign governments—the "Kennedy Round"—to reduce barriers to international trade, in an effort to stimulate American exports. He began to consider the use of Keynesian fiscal and monetary tools in more direct and positive ways than those used by any previous administrations—culminating in his 1962 proposal for a substantial federal tax cut to stimulate the economy.

He even put his personal prestige on the line in a battle to curb inflation. In 1962, several steel companies, led by U.S. Steel, announced that they were raising their prices by \$6 a ton, a move certain to trigger similar action by the rest of the steel industry. Angrily denouncing the steel companies both publicly and privately, the president exerted enormous pressure on U.S. Steel to rescind its decision—threatening the company with lawsuits and the can-

cellation of government contracts. He even called the president of U.S. Steel, Roger Blough, to the White House for an impassioned tongue-lashing. Finally, the steel companies relented and abandoned the price rise. But the president had won only a fleeting victory. His relationship with the business community was a strained one from that moment on, and a few months later the steel companies quietly raised prices again. The president did not protest.

Kennedy found the greatest opportunities to display his vision of presidential leadership in two areas: foreign policy and personal style. In his capacity as a world leader, he discovered—like other presidents both before and after him—that he could act without the constraints that hampered his domestic initiatives. And in adopting a new presidential style, he was able to employ his own most effective political skills. More than any other president of the century (excepting perhaps the two Roosevelts and, later, Ronald Reagan), Kennedy made his own personality an integral part of his presidency and a central focus of national attention.

Nothing more clearly illustrates how important Kennedy and the presidency had become to the American people than the tragedy of November 22, 1963, and the popular reaction to it. Already, the president was beginning to campaign for reelection the following year; and in November, he traveled to Texas with his wife and Vice President Lyndon Johnson for a series of political appearances. While the presidential motorcade rode slowly through the streets of Dallas, shots rang out. Two bullets struck the president—one in the throat, the other in the head. He was sped to a nearby hospital, where minutes later he was pronounced dead.

The circumstances of the assassination seemed clearer at the time than they did from the vantage point of later years. Lee Harvey Oswald, who appeared to be a confused and embittered Marxist, was arrested for the crime later that day, on the basis of strong circumstantial evidence. (Among other things, Oswald had shot and killed a police officer who had tried to apprehend him.) Two days later, as Oswald was being moved from one jail to another, Jack Ruby, a Dallas nightclub owner, stepped from a crowd of reporters and fired a pistol into Oswald's abdomen, an event that was broadcast graphically around the world on television. Oswald died only hours later. The popular assumption at the time was that Oswald had acted alone, expressing through the murder his personal frustration and anger, and that Ruby had acted out of grief and out of a desire to make himself a popular

hero. These assumptions received what seemed to be conclusive confirmation by a federal commission, chaired by Chief Justice Earl Warren, that was appointed to review the events surrounding the assassination. In later years, however, more and more questions and doubts arose about the circumstances of the shooting; and an increasing number of Americans became convinced that the Warren Commission report had not revealed the full story. For more than two decades, alternative theories of the assassination continued to surface—some of them based on lurid conspiracy theories, some based on real discrepancies in the evidence. In 1978, a congressional subcommittee raised the first official challenge from within the federal government to the findings of the Warren Commission by concluding, on the basis of controversial acoustical evidence, that more than one gunman had been involved in the shootings in Dallas. But the committee had no answer to the question of who the other assassins might have been.

The death of President Kennedy was one of those traumatic episodes in national history that have left a permanent mark on all who experienced it. Millions of Americans suspended their normal activities for four days to watch the televised events surrounding the presidential funeral. Images of Kennedy's widow, his small children, his funeral procession, his dramatic grave site at Arlington Cemetery with its symbolic eternal flame—all became deeply embedded in the public mind. When in later times Americans would look back at the optimistic days of the 1950s and early 1960s and wonder how everything had subsequently seemed to unravel, many would think of November 22, 1963, as the beginning of the change.

Lyndon Johnson

At the time, however, much of the nation took comfort in the personality and performance of Kennedy's successor in the White House, Lyndon Baines Johnson. Johnson was a native of the poor "hill country" of west Texas, the son of a once-prominent state politician who ended his days in poverty and obscurity. Johnson himself had risen to eminence by dint of extraordinary, even obsessive effort and ambition. He entered public life in the 1930s, first as an aide to a Texas congressman, then as the director of the New Deal's National Youth Administration in Texas, then as a young congressman with close personal ties to Franklin Roosevelt. After twelve years in the House,

Retroactive I, 1964

Within months of his death, John Kennedy had become transformed in the American imagination to a figure larger than life, a symbol of the nation's thwarted aspirations. The artist Robert Rauschenberg gave evidence of Kennedy's new mythological importance by making him the centerpiece of this evocation of contemporary American society. (Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford)



he narrowly won election in 1948 to the United States Senate. And there, by carefully cultivating the favor of party leaders, he rose steadily in influence to become the Senate majority leader. He brought to that post, as he would bring to the presidency, a remarkable level of energy and a legendary ability to persuade and cajole his colleagues into following his lead. He had failed in 1960 to win the Democratic nomination for president; but he had surprised many who knew him by agreeing to accept the second position on the ticket with Kennedy. The events in Dallas thrust him into the White House.

Johnson's personality could hardly have been more different from Kennedy's. Tall, gawky, inelegant in his public speech, he was the antithesis of the modern media politician. Where Kennedy had been smooth and urbane, Johnson was coarse, even crude. Where Kennedy had been personally reticent and almost unfailingly polite, Johnson was effusive, garrulous, and at times viciously cruel. But like Kennedy, Johnson was a man who believed in the active use of power. And he proved, in the end, more effective than his predecessor in translating his goals into reality.



Johnson the Candidate

Johnson never evoked the sort of personal adulation that John Kennedy had attracted. But in the course of the 1964 campaign, at least, his ebullient style generated considerable popular enthusiasm. (Popperfoto)

Johnson's ability to manage the Congress provided perhaps the most vivid contrast with Kennedy. Between 1963 and 1966, he compiled the most impressive legislative record of any president since Franklin Roosevelt. He was aided by the tidal wave of emotion that followed the death of President Kennedy, which helped win passage of many New Frontier proposals as a memorial to the slain leader. But Johnson also constructed a remarkable reform program of his own, one that he ultimately labeled the "Great Society." And he won approval of much of it through the same sort of skillful lobbying that had made him an effective majority leader.

Johnson envisioned himself, as well, as a great "coalition builder," drawing into the Democratic fold as many different constituencies as possible. Even more than Kennedy, he tried to avoid the politics of conflict—that is, of winning the support of one group by attacking another. Johnson wanted the support of everyone, and for a time he very nearly got it. His first year in office was, by necessity, dominated by the campaign for reelection. From the beginning, there was little doubt that he would win. As a Democrat in an era of wide support for liberal reform, as the successor of a beloved and martyred president, and as a personification of the same energetic activism that had helped make Kennedy so popular, he was an almost unbeatable candidate. He received considerable assistance from the Republican party, which in 1964 fell under the sway of its right wing and nominated the conservative Senator Barry

Goldwater of Arizona. Liberal Republicans abandoned Goldwater and openly supported Johnson.

In the fall campaign, Johnson avoided specific, detailed promises, concentrating instead on attracting support from as wide a range of voters as possible and letting Goldwater's rigid conservatism drive even more Americans into the Democratic fold. The strategy worked. Johnson received more votes, over 43 million, than any candidate before him, and a larger plurality, over 61 percent, than any candidate before or since. Goldwater managed to carry only his home state of Arizona and five states in the Deep South. Record Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress, many of whose members had been swept into office only because of the margin of Johnson's victory, ensured that the president would be able to fulfill many of his goals. On election night, Johnson told the nation that he regarded his victory as a "mandate for unity." For a time, that unity seemed to survive; and Johnson seemed well on his way to achieving his own most cherished aim: becoming the most successful reform president of the century.

The Assault on Poverty

The domestic programs of Kennedy and Johnson shared two basic goals: maintaining the strength of the American economy and expanding the responsibilities of the federal government for the general social welfare. In the first, the two presidents were

largely continuing a commitment that had been central to virtually every administration since early in the century. In the second, however, they were responding to a marked change in public assumptions. In particular, they were responding to what some described as the “discovery of poverty” in the late 1950s and early 1960s—the realization by Americans who had been glorying in prosperity that there were substantial portions of the population that remained destitute.

For the first time since the 1930s, therefore, the federal government took steps in the 1960s not only to strengthen and expand existing social welfare programs but to create important new ones. The effort had begun in the Kennedy administration, although at first without great result. Kennedy did manage to win approval of important changes in existing welfare programs. A revision of the minimum wage law extended coverage to an additional 3.6 million workers and raised the minimum hourly wage from \$1.00 to \$1.25. Another measure increased Social Security benefits. Kennedy’s most ambitious proposals, however, remained unfulfilled until after his death.

The most important of these, perhaps, was Medicare: a program to provide federal aid to the elderly for medical expenses. Its enactment in 1965 came at the end of a bitter, twenty-year debate between those who believed in the concept of national health assistance and those who denounced it as “socialized medicine.” But the program as it went into effect removed many objections. For one thing, it avoided the stigma of “welfare” in much the same way the Social Security system had done: by making Medicare benefits available to all elderly Americans, regardless of need. That created a large middle-class constituency for the program. More important, perhaps, it defused the opposition of the medical community. Doctors serving Medicare patients continued to practice privately and to charge their normal fees; Medicare simply shifted responsibility for paying a large proportion of those fees from the patient to the government.

With that barrier now hurdled, advocates of national health insurance pushed for even more extensive coverage; and in 1966, President Johnson steered to passage the Medicaid program, which extended federal medical assistance to welfare recipients of all ages. Criticism of both programs continued. National health insurance advocates continued to insist that coverage be extended to all Americans, young and old, rich and poor. Others spoke harshly of the bureaucratic problems Medicare and Medicaid cre-

ated, and of the corruption these programs seemed to encourage.

Still more complained bitterly of the tremendous costs the reforms were imposing on the government and the taxpayer. Beginning in 1969, as a result, the government began attempting to limit eligibility for assistance in order to reduce expenses. But public support for the programs was by now too powerful to allow very much limitation, especially on the benefits to the middle class. Medicare costs, in particular, continued to spiral. In 1970, expenditures for the program totaled \$6.2 billion. By 1984, they had risen to over \$60 billion. The average annual Medicare expenditure per person in that same period rose from \$64 to \$259, reflecting the dramatic increase in health costs in general.

Medicare and Medicaid were first steps in a much larger assault on poverty—one that Kennedy had been contemplating in the last months of his life and one that Johnson brought to fruition. Determined to eradicate the “pockets of poverty” that were receiving wide public attention, Johnson announced to Congress only weeks after taking office the declaration of an “unconditional war on poverty.” The Economic Opportunity Act he then steered to passage provided for, among other things, the establishment of an Office of Economic Opportunity—the centerpiece in Johnson’s vision of the Great Society. From the OEO stemmed an array of educational programs: vocational training, remedial education, college work-study grants, and others. The office funneled government money as well into programs to provide employment for unemployed youths—through the Job Corps, the Neighborhood Youth Corps, and other agencies. And it established VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America), a program reminiscent of the paternal reform efforts of the progressive era. VISTA volunteers moved out across the country into troubled communities to provide educational and social services. Other OEO programs financed housing assistance, health care, neighborhood improvements, and many more antipoverty efforts.

The OEO’s Community Action programs were particularly controversial. The idea of community action (an idea promoted by, among others, Robert Kennedy) was to involve members of poor communities themselves in the planning and administration of the programs designed to help them, to promote what some of its advocates called “maximum feasible participation.” The Community Action agencies at the local level varied widely. In some places, they

were staffed and administered by community activists, who often challenged established political organizations. In other places, the established political organizations seized control of community action and made it part of the existing system.

It seems clear in retrospect that these programs provided a number of important benefits to poor communities that more conventional programs never did. Perhaps most important, they served in effect as a jobs program for poor people, giving them training and experience in administrative and political work. Many people who went on to important careers in politics or community organizing, including many black politicians who would rise to prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, got their start in Community Action programs.

Community Action had a dramatic impact, too, on American Indians, many of whom were already mobilizing to demand greater self-determination. The OEO programs allowed tribal leaders to design and run programs for themselves and to apply for funds from the federal government on an equal basis with state and municipal authorities. Administering these programs helped produce a new generation of tribal leaders who learned a great deal about political and bureaucratic power from the experience.

Despite its achievements, the Community Action approach proved impossible to sustain. Most local officials felt uncomfortable watching the creation of a new layer of government competing with, and often challenging, them. Many programs fell victim either to local mismanagement or to cumbersome federal supervision, problems that frequently resulted in a substantial waste of funds. The activists in Community Action agencies employed tactics to advance their aims that mainstream politicians considered frighteningly radical; and as is often the case, the seeming excesses of a few agencies shaped the popular image of the program as a whole.

The nearly \$3 billion that the OEO spent during its first two years of existence did much to assist those who managed to qualify for funds. It helped to reduce poverty significantly in certain areas. It fell far short, however, of its goal of eliminating poverty altogether. The job-training programs that formed so important a part of the war on poverty produced generally disappointing results, particularly among the urban black unemployed; blacks continued, once trained, to be barred from many jobs because of racial discrimination or because the jobs simply did not exist in their communities. Whatever the strengths or weaknesses of particular approaches to the problem,

the war on poverty never really approached the dimensions necessary to achieve its goals. From the beginning, funds were inadequate. And as the years passed and a costly war in Southeast Asia became the nation's first priority, even those limited funds began to dwindle.

Cities and Schools

Closely tied to the antipoverty program were federal efforts to promote the revitalization of decaying cities and to strengthen the nation's schools. Again, many such programs had received support from the Kennedy administration but won passage under Johnson. President Kennedy himself had managed to steer through Congress the Housing Act of 1961, which offered \$4.9 billion in federal grants to cities for the preservation of open spaces, the development of mass-transit systems, and the subsidization of middle-income housing. Johnson went further. He established the Department of Housing and Urban Development to symbolize the government's commitment to the cities. (The first secretary of this department, Robert Weaver, was the first black ever to serve in the cabinet.) And Johnson also inaugurated the Model Cities program, which offered federal subsidies for urban redevelopment.

Kennedy had fought long and in vain to win congressional passage of a program to provide federal aid to public education. Like the idea of federal health insurance, the concept of aid to education aroused deep suspicion in many Americans, who saw it as the first step in a federal effort to take control of the schools from localities. Conservatives argued forcefully that once the government began paying for education, it would begin telling the schools how and what they must teach. Opposition arose from another quarter as well: Catholics insisted that aid to education must extend to parochial as well as public schools, something that President Kennedy had refused to consider and that many Americans believed was unconstitutional. Johnson managed to circumvent both objections with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and a series of subsequent measures. Such bills extended aid to both private and parochial schools—aid that was based on the economic conditions of their students, not the needs of the schools themselves. The formula met criteria established earlier by the Supreme Court, and it satisfied some, although not all, conservatives. Total federal expenditures for education and technical

training rose from \$5 billion to \$12 billion between 1964 and 1967.

Legacies of the Great Society

The great surge of reform of the Kennedy–Johnson years reflected a new awareness of the nation’s social problems. It also reflected the confidence of liberals that America’s resources were virtually limitless and that purposeful public effort could solve any problem. By the time Johnson left office, legislation had been either enacted or initiated to deal with a remarkable number of social issues: poverty, health care, education, cities, transportation, the environment, consumer protection, agriculture, science, the arts. The Great Society produced the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities, bringing government assistance to scholarship and the arts in America for the first time since the New Deal. It set aside millions of acres of land to be preserved as wilderness. It established new environmental regulations to improve the quality of the air and water. It banned billboards and other forms of advertising from the interstate highway system (as part of a “beautification” program much favored by the First Lady, Lady Bird Johnson).

Finally, the Great Society enacted the most important reform of American immigration policy in forty years. The Immigration Act of 1965 maintained

a strict limit on the number of newcomers admitted to the country each year (170,000), but it eliminated the “national origins” system established in the 1920s, which gave preference to immigrants from northern Europe over those from other parts of the world. The new bill, one of the most important pieces of legislation of the 1960s even if largely unnoticed at the time, continued to restrict immigration from some parts of Latin America, but it allowed people from all parts of Europe, Asia, and Africa to enter the United States on an equal basis. It meant that large new categories of immigrants—and especially large numbers of Asians—would begin entering the United States by the early 1970s and changing the character of the American population.

Taken together, the Great Society reforms meant a dramatic increase in federal spending. For a time, rising tax revenues from the growing economy nearly compensated for the new expenditures. In 1964, Lyndon Johnson managed to win passage of the \$11.5 billion tax cut that Kennedy had first proposed in 1962. Although the cut increased an already sizable federal deficit, it produced substantial economic growth over the next several years that made up for much of the revenue initially lost. But as the Great Society programs began to multiply, and particularly as they began to compete with the escalating costs of America’s military ventures, the federal budget rapidly outpaced increases in revenues. In 1961, the federal government had spent \$94.4 billion. By

MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE GREAT SOCIETY

<p>1964 Civil Rights Act (prohibiting discrimination in public accommodations and hiring) Twenty-fourth Amendment (abolishing poll tax) Tax Reduction Act Urban Mass Transportation Act (subsidizing urban mass transit) Economic Opportunity Act (creating OEO, Job Corps, VISTA) Wilderness Preservation Act</p> <p>1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (providing aid to schools) Medicare Civil Rights Act (protecting voting rights) Omnibus Housing Act (providing rent supplements to poor)</p>	<p>1965 Department of Housing and Urban Development National Endowments of the Arts and Humanities Water Quality Act Immigration law reform Air Quality Act Higher Education Act (offering federally financed scholarships)</p> <p>1966 Medicaid National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act Highway Safety Act Minimum wage increase Department of Transportation Model Cities</p> <p>1967 Food Stamps Corporation for Public Broadcasting</p>
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1970, that sum had more than doubled, to \$196.6 billion. And except for 1969, when there was a modest surplus, the budget throughout the decade showed a deficit, which in 1968 rose to \$25.1 billion—the highest in history to that point.

The vast costs of the programs of the Great Society, and the apparent inability of American society to raise the government revenues to pay for them, contributed to a growing disillusionment in later years with the idea of federal efforts to solve social problems. By the 1980s, many Americans had become convinced that the Great Society social programs had not worked; that the federal government lacked the expertise or the administrative capacity to make them work; that what progress there had been toward eliminating poverty in the 1960s and 1970s had been a result of economic growth, not government assistance. Others, however, argued equally fervently that social programs had made important contributions both to the welfare of the specific groups they were designed to help and to the health of the economy as a whole. They pointed, in particular, to the reduction of hunger in America, the inclusion of poor people in health-care programs, and the increased services available to young children.

Whatever the reason, the decade of the 1960s—a decade marked both by stunning economic growth and ambitious government antipoverty efforts—saw the most substantial decrease in poverty in the United States of any period in the nation's history. In 1959, according to the most widely accepted estimates, 21 percent of the American people lived below the officially established poverty line. By 1969, only 12 percent remained below that line. The improvements affected blacks and whites in about the same proportion: 56 percent of the black population had lived in poverty in 1959, only 32 percent did so ten years later—a 42 percent reduction; 18 percent of all whites had been poor in 1959, but only 10 percent were poor a decade later—a 44 percent reduction.

The Battle for Racial Equality

The nation's most important domestic initiative in the 1960s was the new national commitment to provide justice and equality to American blacks. It was also the most difficult commitment, the one that produced the severest strains on American society. Yet despite the initial reluctance of many whites, includ-

ing even many liberals, to confront the problem, it was an issue that could no longer be ignored. Black Americans were themselves ensuring that the nation would have to deal with the problem of race.

Expanding Protests

John Kennedy had long been sympathetic to the cause of racial justice, but he was hardly a committed crusader. His intervention during the 1960 campaign to help win the release of Martin Luther King, Jr., from a Georgia prison won him a large plurality of the black vote. Once in office, however, he was—like many presidents before him—reluctant to jeopardize his legislative program by openly committing himself to racial reform, fearing that he would alienate key Democratic senators. Resisting the arguments of those who urged new civil-rights legislation, the Kennedy administration worked instead to expand the enforcement of existing laws and to support litigation to overturn existing segregation statutes. Both efforts produced only limited results. Still, the administration hoped to contain the issue of race and resisted pressure to do more.

But that pressure was rapidly growing too powerful to ignore. In February 1960, black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, staged a sit-in at a segregated Woolworth's lunch counter—an event that received wide national attention. In the following months, such demonstrations spread throughout the South, forcing many merchants to integrate their facilities. The sit-in movement had two important consequences. It mobilized large groups of blacks throughout the country, and particularly in the South, to take direct action to protest discrimination. Some of those who had participated in the sit-ins formed, in the fall of 1960, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which worked to keep the spirit of resistance alive. The sit-ins also aroused the support of a substantial number of Northern whites.

In 1961, students of both races, working with the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), began what they called "freedom rides." Traveling by bus throughout the South, they went from city to city attempting to force the desegregation of bus stations. They were met in some places with such savage violence on the part of whites that the president finally dispatched federal marshals to help keep the peace and ordered the integration of all bus and train stations. In the meantime, SNCC workers began fan-



Sitting In

Black students stage a sit-in at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Charlotte, North Carolina, in 1960, after being refused service by the waitresses there. A similar demonstration at a Woolworth's in Greensboro several weeks earlier sparked a wave of sit-ins across the South. (Bruce Roberts/Rapho-Photo Researchers)

ning out through black communities and even into remote rural areas to encourage blacks to challenge the obstacles to voting that white society had created. The SCLC also created citizen education and other programs (many of them organized by the indefatigable Ella Baker, one of the great grass-roots leaders of the movement) in an effort to mobilize black workers, farmers, housewives, and others to participate more fully in the challenge to segregation and discrimination.

Continuing judicial efforts to enforce the integration of public education increased the pressure on national leaders to respond to the civil-rights movement. In October 1962, a federal court ordered the University of Mississippi to enroll its first black stu-

dent, James Meredith; Governor Ross Barnett, a strident segregationist, refused to enforce the order. When angry whites in Oxford, Mississippi, began rioting to protest the court decree, President Kennedy sent federal troops to the city to restore order and protect Meredith's right to attend the university.

Events in Alabama the following year proved even more influential. In April 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., launched a series of extensive nonviolent demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama, a city unsurpassed in the strength of its commitment to segregation. Local officials responded brutally. Police Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor personally supervised measures to break up King's peaceful marches, arresting hundreds of demonstrators and

using attack dogs, tear gas, electric cattle prods, and fire hoses—at times even against small children—as much of the nation watched televised reports in horror. Two months later, Governor George Wallace stood in the doorway of a building at the University of Alabama to prevent the court-ordered enrollment of several black students. Only after the arrival of federal marshals did he give way. The same night, NAACP official Medgar Evers was murdered in Mississippi.

A National Commitment

The events in Alabama and Mississippi were both a personal shock and a political warning to the president. He could not, he realized, any longer avoid the issue of race. In a historic television address the night of the University of Alabama confrontation, Kennedy spoke eloquently of the “moral issue” facing the nation. “If an American,” he asked, “because his skin is dark, . . . cannot enjoy the full and free life which all of us want, then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place? Who among us would then be content with the counsels of patience and delay?” Days later, he introduced a series of new legislative proposals prohibiting segregation in “public accommodations” (stores, restaurants, theaters, hotels), barring discrimination in employment, and increasing the power of the government to file suits on behalf of school integration.

Congressional opposition to the new proposals was strong, and it was clear from the start that winning passage of the legislation would be difficult. Black Americans themselves, however, made clear that there could be no retreat from the effort. In August 1963, more than 200,000 demonstrators marched down the Mall in Washington, D.C., and gathered before the Lincoln Memorial for the greatest civil-rights demonstration in the nation’s history. President Kennedy, who had at first opposed the idea of the march, in the end gave it his open support. And the peaceful gathering, therefore, seemed at the time to denote less the existence of a bitter racial struggle than the birth of a new national commitment to civil rights. Martin Luther King, Jr., in one of the greatest speeches of his distinguished oratorical career—indeed one of the most memorable speeches of any public figure of the century—aroused the crowd with a litany of images prefaced again and again by the phrase “I have a dream.” The march was

the high-water mark of the peaceful, interracial civil-rights movement—and one of the high points of liberal optimism as well.

The assassination of President Kennedy three months later gave new impetus to the battle for civil-rights legislation. The ambitious measure that Kennedy had proposed in June 1963 had passed through the House of Representatives with relative ease; but it seemed hopelessly stalled in the Senate, where a determined filibuster by Southern conservatives continued to prevent a vote. Early in 1964, after Johnson had applied both public and private pressure, supporters of the measure finally mustered the two-thirds majority necessary to close debate; and the Senate passed the most comprehensive civil-rights bill in the history of the nation.

The Battle for Voting Rights

At the very moment of passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, however, new efforts were under way in the South to win even greater gains for blacks. During the “freedom summer” of that year, thousands of civil-rights workers, black and white, Northern and Southern, spread out through the South, but primarily in Mississippi, establishing “freedom schools,” staging demonstrations, and demanding not only an end to segregation but the inclusion of blacks in the political process. Like earlier civil-rights activists, they met a hostile response—in some cases, a murderous response. Three of the first freedom workers to arrive in the South—two whites, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, and one black, James Chaney—disappeared; several weeks later, the FBI found their bodies buried under an earthen dam. Local law enforcement officials were later found to have participated in the murders.

The “freedom summer” also helped produce a political challenge to the established white order: the creation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party, an integrated alternative to the regular party organization. Under the leadership of Fannie Lou Hamer and others, the MFDP challenged the regular party’s right to its seats at the Democratic National Convention that summer. President Johnson, eager to avoid conflicts at a convention that many likened to a “coronation,” pressured both sides to accept a compromise, by which the MFDP could be seated as observers, with promises of party reforms later on, but the regular party would retain its official stand-



King Marches Through Selma

Martin Luther King, Jr., and his wife, Coretta (right), lead demonstrators on a march through Selma, Alabama, during his turbulent campaign for black voting rights in 1965. Selma was one of the last of the great interracial crusades on behalf of civil rights. Subsequent campaigns, such as King's frustrated effort in Chicago in 1966, attracted much less support from Northern whites and far less attention in the media. (Bruce Davidson/Magnum)

ing. Both sides grudgingly accepted the agreement, but both were embittered by it.

Black demands continued to escalate during 1965, and government efforts to satisfy them continued to intensify. In Selma, Alabama, in March, Martin Luther King, Jr., helped organize a major demonstration by blacks demanding the right to register to vote. Confronted with official resistance, the

demonstrators attempted a peaceful protest march; but Selma sheriff Jim Clark led local police in a brutal attack on the demonstrators—which, as in Birmingham, was televised to a horrified nation. Two Northern whites participating in the Selma march were murdered in the course of the effort there—one, a minister, beaten to death in the streets of the town; the other, a Detroit housewife, shot as she drove

along a highway at night. The national outrage that followed the events in Alabama helped push Lyndon Johnson to propose and win passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1965, which provided federal protection to blacks attempting to exercise their right to vote. The traditional criteria for limiting the franchise to whites—literacy tests, knowledge of the Constitution, “good character,” and others—were now illegal. (Another, similar device—the poll tax—had been abolished by constitutional amendment in 1964.)

But the civil-rights acts, the Supreme Court decisions, the new social welfare programs designed to help poor blacks, and other government efforts—all were insufficient. Important as such gains were, they failed to satisfy the rapidly rising expectations of American blacks, whose vision of equality included not only an end to segregation but access to economic prosperity. What had once seemed to many liberals a simple moral commitment was becoming a far more complex and demanding issue. Gradually, the generally peaceful, largely optimistic civil-rights movement of the early 1960s was evolving into what would become a major racial crisis.

The Changing Movement

It was inevitable, perhaps, that the focus of the racial struggle would shift away from the issue of segregation to the far broader and more complex demands of poor urban blacks. For decades, the nation's black population had been undergoing a major demographic shift; and by the 1960s, the problem of race was no longer a primarily Southern or rural one, as it had been earlier in the century. In 1910, only 25 percent of all blacks had lived in cities and only 10 percent outside the South. By 1966, 69 percent were living in metropolitan areas and 45 percent outside the South. In several of the largest cities, the proportion of blacks at least doubled between 1950 and 1968. Blacks constituted 30 percent or more of the population of seven major cities and nearly 70 percent of the population of Washington, D.C.

Conditions in the black ghettos of most cities were abysmal. And although the economic condition of much of American society was improving, in many poor urban communities—which were experiencing both a rapidly growing population and the flight of white businesses—things were getting worse. More than half of all American nonwhites lived in poverty at the beginning of the 1960s; black

unemployment was twice that of whites. And although conditions improved for many blacks during the decade, the residents of the inner cities were usually the last to benefit. Black ghetto residents were far more likely than whites to be victimized by crime, to be enticed into drug addiction, and to be subjected to substandard housing at exploitive prices. They were far less likely than whites to receive an adequate education or to have access to skilled employment.

As the battle against legal segregation progressed in the early 1960s with the passage of the landmark Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, even such relatively moderate black leaders as Martin Luther King, Jr., began to turn their attention to the deeper, less immediately visible problems of their race. By the mid-1960s, the legal battle against school desegregation had moved beyond the initial assault on de jure segregation (segregation by law) to an attack on de facto segregation (segregation by practice, as through residential patterns), thus carrying the fight into Northern cities. Such attacks would lead (beginning in 1970) to the busing of students from one area of a community to another to achieve integration—an issue that would prove deeply divisive.

Many black leaders (and their white supporters) were demanding, similarly, that the battle against job discrimination move beyond the prohibition of overtly racist practices. Employers should not only abandon negative measures to deny jobs to blacks; they should adopt positive measures to recruit minorities, thus compensating for past injustices. Lyndon Johnson gave his support to the concept of “affirmative action” in 1965. Three years later, the Department of Labor ruled that all contractors doing business with the federal government must submit “a written affirmative action compliance program” to the government. Affirmative action guidelines gradually extended to all institutions doing business with or receiving funds from the federal government (including schools and universities). Yet another issue had arisen that would soon anger and alienate many whites.

And civil-rights activists were now, increasingly, directing their attention toward racism in the North. Martin Luther King, Jr. organized a major campaign in the summer of 1966 (a year after Selma) in Chicago. He hoped to direct national attention to housing and employment discrimination in Northern industrial cities in much the same way he had exposed legal racism in the South. But the Chicago campaign not only evoked vicious and at times violent opposition from white residents of that city; it

failed to arouse the national conscience to anything approaching the degree the events in the South had done.

Urban Violence

As the Chicago campaign suggested, the most important black problem by the mid-1960s was less legalized segregation than urban poverty. Beginning in 1964, moreover, the problem thrust itself into public prominence when residents of black ghettos in major cities participated in a series of riots that shocked and terrified much of the nation's white population. There were a few scattered disturbances in the summer of 1964, most notably in New York City's Harlem. But the first major race riot since the end of World War II occurred the following summer in the Watts section of Los Angeles. In the midst of a more or less routine traffic arrest, a white police officer struck a protesting black bystander with his club. The apparently minor incident unleashed a storm of pent-up anger and bitterness that resulted in a full week of mounting violence. As many as 10,000 rioters were estimated to have participated—attacking white motorists, burning buildings, looting stores, and sniping at policemen. As in most race riots, it was blacks who suffered most; of the thirty-four people who died during the Watts uprising, which was eventually quelled by the National Guard, twenty-eight were black. In the summer of 1966, there were forty-three additional outbreaks, the most serious of them in Chicago and Cleveland. And in the summer of 1967, there were eight major riots, including the most serious of them all—a racial clash in Detroit in which forty-three people (thirty-three of them black) died.

Televised reports of the violence alarmed millions of Americans and created both a new sense of urgency and a growing sense of doubt among those whites who had embraced the cause of racial justice only a few years before. After the Detroit uprising, President Johnson expressed the ambivalence of many white liberals about the riots, calling sternly on the one hand for a restoration of law and order, and appealing simultaneously for an attack on the social problems that were causing despair and violence. A special Commission on Civil Disorders echoed the latter impulse. Its celebrated report, issued in the spring of 1968, recommended massive spending to eliminate the abysmal conditions of the ghettos. "Only a commitment to national action on an un-

precedented scale," the commission concluded, "can shape a future compatible with the historic ideals of American society." To much of the nation, however, the lesson of the riots was that racial change was moving too quickly and that stern, coercive measures were necessary to stop violence and lawlessness.

Black Power

Disillusioned with the ideal of peaceful change in cooperation with whites, an increasing number of blacks were turning to a new approach to the racial issue: the philosophy of "black power." Black power could mean many different things. In its most moderate form, it was simply a belief in the importance of black self-reliance. In its more extreme guises, black power could mean complete separatism and even violent revolution. In all its forms, however, black power suggested a move away from interracial cooperation and toward increased awareness of racial distinctiveness.

The most important and lasting impact of the black-power ideology was a social and psychological one: the instilling of racial pride in black Americans who had long been under pressure from their nation's dominant culture to think of themselves as somehow inferior to whites. It encouraged the growth of "black studies" in schools and universities. It helped stimulate important black literary and artistic movements. It produced a new interest among many blacks in their African roots. It led to a rejection by some blacks of certain cultural practices borrowed from white society: "Afro" hair styles began to replace artificially straightened hair; some blacks began to adopt African styles of dress, even to change their names.

But black power had political manifestations as well, most notably in creating a deep schism within the civil-rights movement. Traditional black organizations that had emphasized cooperation with sympathetic whites—groups such as the NAACP, the Urban League, and King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)—now faced competition from younger, more radical groups. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) had both begun as relatively moderate, interracial organizations. SNCC, in fact, had been a student branch of the SCLC. By the mid-1960s, however, these and other groups were calling for more radical and occasionally even violent action against the "racism" of



Malcolm X

Malcolm X, a leader of the militant Black Muslims, arrives in Washington, D.C., in May 1963 to set up a headquarters for the organization there. Malcolm was hated and feared by many whites during his lifetime. After he was assassinated in 1965, he came to be widely revered by black Americans. (UPI/Bettmann Newsphotos)

white society and were openly rejecting the approaches of older, more established black leaders.

Other groups were emerging entirely outside the established civil-rights movement. Particularly alarming to whites were such overtly revolutionary organizations as the Black Panthers, based in Oakland, California, and the separatist group, the Nation of Islam, which denounced all whites as “devils” and appealed to blacks to embrace the Islamic faith and work for complete racial separation. The most celebrated of the Black Muslims, as whites often termed

them, was Malcolm Little, who adopted the name Malcolm X (“X” to denote his lost African surname). His *Autobiography* (1965)—written in collaboration with Alex Haley—became one of the most influential documents of the 1960s. Malcolm X himself died shortly before publication of his book when black gunmen, presumably under orders from rivals within the Nation of Islam, burst into a meeting he was addressing and assassinated him. But he remained an important figure in many black communities long after his death—as important and revered a symbol to some blacks as Martin Luther King, Jr., was to others.

From “Flexible Response” to Vietnam

In international affairs as much as in domestic reform, the optimistic liberalism of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations dictated a more positive, more active approach to dealing with the nation’s problems than in the past. Just as social difficulties at home required a search for new solutions, so the threat of communism overseas seemed to call for new methods and strategies. And just as the new activism in domestic reform ultimately produced frustration and disorder, so did the new activism overseas gradually pull the nation toward disaster.

Diversifying Foreign Policy

John Kennedy’s stirring inaugural address was a clear indication of how central opposition to communism was to his and the nation’s thinking. “In the long history of the world,” he proclaimed, “only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. I do not shrink from this responsibility; I welcome it.” Yet the speech—which significantly made no mention whatever of domestic affairs—was also an indication of Kennedy’s belief that the United States had not done enough to counter Soviet expansion. The defense policies of the new administration, therefore, emphasized not only strengthening existing implementations of warfare but developing new ones—a strategy that came to be known as “flexible response.”

Kennedy had charged repeatedly during his campaign that the United States was suffering from a

“missile gap,” that the Soviet Union had moved ahead of America in the number of missiles and warheads it could deploy. Even before the election, Kennedy received information indicating that whatever missile gap there was favored the United States. Nevertheless, once in office, he insisted on substantial increases in the nation’s nuclear armaments. The Soviet Union, which had several years earlier decided to slow the growth of its atomic arsenal, responded with a new missile-building program of its own.

At the same time, Kennedy expressed dissatisfaction with the nation’s ability to meet communist threats in “emerging areas” of the Third World—the areas in which, Kennedy believed, the real struggle against communism would be waged in the future. A nuclear deterrent might prevent a Soviet invasion of Western Europe; but in the Middle East, in Africa, in Latin America, in Asia, where insurgent forces had learned to employ methods of jungle and guerrilla warfare, different methods would be necessary. Kennedy gave enthusiastic support to the development of new counter insurgency forces—a million soldiers trained specifically to fight modern, limited wars. He even chose their uniforms, which included the distinctive green beret from which the Special Forces derived their nickname.

Along with military diversification, Kennedy favored the development of methods for expanding American influence through peaceful means. To repair the badly deteriorating relationship with Latin America, he proposed an “Alliance for Progress”: a series of projects undertaken cooperatively by the United States and Latin American governments for peaceful development and stabilization of the nations of that region. Its purpose was both to spur social and economic development and to inhibit the rise of Castro-like movements in other Central or South American countries. Poor coordination and inadequate funding sharply limited the impact of the program, but relations between the United States and some Latin American countries did improve. Kennedy also inaugurated the Agency for International Development (AID) to coordinate foreign aid. And he established what became one of his most popular innovations: the Peace Corps, which trained and sent abroad young volunteers to work in developing areas.

Fiasco in Cuba

Kennedy’s efforts to improve relations with developing countries were not aided by a hopelessly bungled

(and, many believed, ill-conceived) assault on the Castro government in Cuba. Convinced that “communist domination in this hemisphere can never be negotiated” and that Castro represented a threat to the stability of other Latin American nations, Kennedy agreed in the first weeks of his presidency to continue a project the Eisenhower administration had begun. For months, the CIA had been helping secretly to train a small army of anti-Castro Cuban exiles in Central America. On April 17, 1961, with the approval of the president, 2,000 of the armed exiles landed at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba, expecting first American air support and then a spontaneous uprising by the Cuban people on their behalf. They received neither. At the last minute, Kennedy withdrew the air support, fearful of involving the United States too directly in the invasion. And the expected uprising did not occur. Instead, well-armed Castro forces easily crushed the invaders, and within two days the entire mission had collapsed.

A somber President Kennedy took full responsibility for the fiasco. Governments around the world—not only communist but neutral and pro-Western as well—joined in condemning the United States. But despite the humiliation, Kennedy refused to abandon the principle of overthrowing Castro by force. “We do not intend to abandon Cuba to the Communists,” he said only three days after the Bay of Pigs.

Confrontations with the Soviet Union

In the grim aftermath of the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy traveled to Vienna in June 1961 for his first meeting with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Their frosty exchange of views did little to reduce tensions between the two nations. Nor did Khrushchev’s continuing irritation over the existence of a noncommunist West Berlin in the heart of East Germany.

Particularly embarrassing to the communists was the mass exodus of residents of East Germany to the West through the easily traversed border in the center of Berlin. Before dawn on August 13, 1961, the Soviet Union stopped the exodus by directing East Germany to construct a wall between East and West Berlin. Guards fired on those who continued to try to escape. For nearly thirty years, the Berlin Wall served as the most potent physical symbol of the tensions between the communist and noncommunist worlds.

The rising tensions culminated the following



Taking the Cuban Missile Crisis to the UN

Adlai Stevenson (seated at far right), the American ambassador to the United Nations, presents evidence to the Security Council on October 25, 1962, in support of President Kennedy's claim that the Soviet Union was installing offensive nuclear weapons in Cuba. At the same time, an American naval blockade was preparing to intercept any Soviet ships bringing military supplies to the island. (UPI/Bettmann Newsphotos)

October in the most dangerous and dramatic crisis of the Cold War. During the summer of 1962, American intelligence agencies had become aware of the arrival of Soviet technicians and equipment in Cuba and of military construction in progress. At first, the administration assumed that the new weapons system was, as the Soviets claimed, purely defensive. On October 14, however, aerial reconnaissance photos produced clear evidence that in fact the Soviets were constructing missile sites on the island. The reasons for the Russian effort were not difficult to discern. The existence of offensive nuclear missiles in Cuba would go far toward compensating for the American lead in deployable atomic weapons, giving the Soviet Union the same easy access to enemy territory that the United States had long possessed by virtue of its missile sites in Europe and the Middle East. The weapons would, moreover, serve as an effective deterrent against any future American invasion of Cuba—a possibility that seemed very real both to Castro and to the Soviet leadership.

To Kennedy, and to most other Americans, the missile sites represented an unconscionable act of aggression by the Soviets toward the United States.

Almost immediately, he decided that the weapons could not be allowed to remain. On October 22, after nearly a week of tense deliberations by a special task force in the White House, the president announced on television that he was establishing a naval and air blockade around Cuba, a “quarantine” against all offensive weapons. Soviet ships bound for the island slowed course or stopped before reaching the point of confrontation. But work on the missile sites continued at full speed. Preparations were under way for an American air attack on the missile sites when, late in the evening of October 26, Kennedy received a message from Khrushchev implying that the Soviet Union would remove the missile bases in exchange for an American pledge not to invade Cuba. Ignoring other, tougher Soviet messages, the president agreed; privately, moreover, he gave assurances that the United States would remove its missiles from Turkey (a decision he had already reached months before but had not yet implemented). On October 27, the agreement became public. The crisis was over.

The Cuban missile crisis brought the world closer to nuclear war than at any time since World War II. It exposed in dangerous fashion the perils that

both the Soviet Union and the United States were creating by allowing their own rivalry to extend into Third World countries. But it also, ironically, helped produce at least a momentary alleviation of Cold War tensions. Both the United States and the Soviet Union had been forced to confront the momentous consequences of war, and both seemed ready in the following months to move toward a new accommodation. In June 1963, President Kennedy addressed a commencement audience at American University in Washington, D.C., with a message starkly different from those of his earlier speeches. The United States did not, he claimed, seek a "Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war." And he seemed for the first time to offer hope for a peaceful rapprochement with the Soviet Union. "If we cannot now end our differences," he said, "at least we can help make the world safe for diversity." That same summer, the United States and the Soviet Union concluded years of negotiation by agreeing to a treaty to ban the testing of nuclear weapons in the atmosphere. It was the first step toward mutual arms reduction since the beginning of the Cold War—a small step, but one that seemed to augur a new era of international relations.

In the longer run, however, the missile crisis had more ominous consequences. The humiliating retreat forced upon the Soviet leadership undermined the position of Nikita Khrushchev and contributed to his fall from power a year later. His replacement, Leonid Brezhnev, was a much more orthodox party figure, less interested in reform than Khrushchev had been. Perhaps more important, the graphic evidence the crisis gave the Soviets of their military inferiority helped produce a dramatic Soviet arms buildup over the next two decades, a buildup that contributed to a comparable increase in the United States in the early 1980s and that for a time undermined American support for a policy of rapprochement.

Johnson and the World

Lyndon Johnson entered the presidency lacking even John Kennedy's limited prior experience with international affairs. He had never been much involved with foreign relations during his years in the Senate. He had traveled widely while vice president, but he had been included in few important decisions. He was eager, therefore, not only to continue the policies of his predecessor but to prove quickly that he too was a strong and forceful leader. As a result,

he quickly came to depend on those members of the Kennedy administration with the most assertive view of the proper uses of American power.

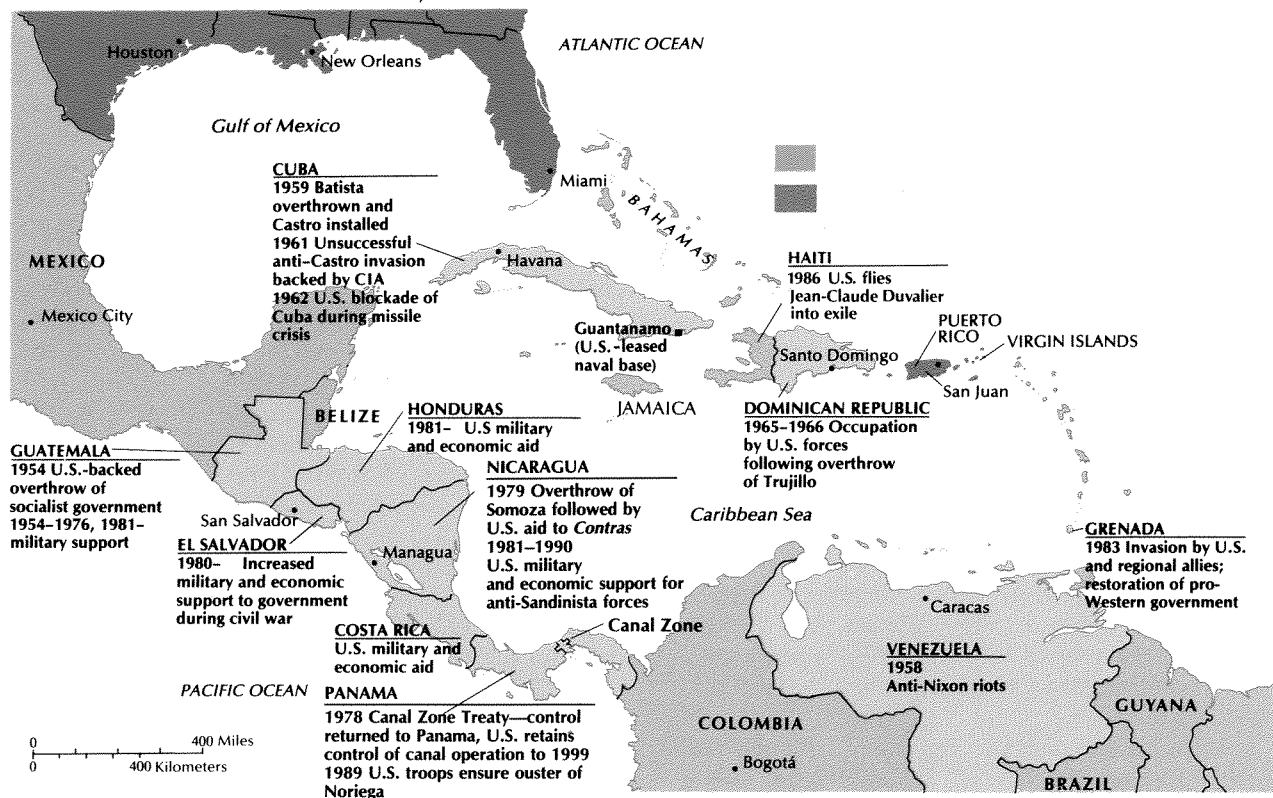
Johnson was even less adept than his predecessor—who had displayed little sensitivity on the subject—at distinguishing between nationalist insurgency and communist expansion. His response to an internal rebellion in the Dominican Republic was a clear illustration. A 1961 assassination had toppled the repressive dictatorship of General Rafael Trujillo, and for the next four years various factions in the country had struggled for dominance. In the spring of 1965, a conservative military regime began to collapse in the face of a revolt by a broad range of groups (including some younger military leaders) on behalf of the left-wing nationalist Juan Bosch. For Johnson, the situation seemed an ideal opportunity to display the effectiveness of American force. Arguing (without any evidence) that Bosch planned to establish a pro-Castro, communist regime, he dispatched 30,000 American troops to quell the disorder. The troops remained—although later they came under the auspices of the Organization of American States—until the Johnson administration had assurances that the Dominican Republic would establish a pro-American, anticommunist regime. Only after a conservative candidate defeated Bosch in a 1966 election were the forces withdrawn.

From Johnson's first moments in office, however, his foreign policy was almost totally dominated by the bitter civil war in Vietnam and by the expanding involvement of the United States there. That involvement had been growing slowly for more than a decade by the time Johnson assumed the presidency. In many respects, therefore, he was simply the unfortunate legatee of commitments initiated by his predecessors. But the determination of the new president, and of others within his administration, to prove their resolve in the battle against communism helped produce the final, decisive steps toward a full-scale commitment.

Guns and Advisers

The American involvement in Vietnam had developed so slowly and imperceptibly that when it began spectacularly to expand, in 1964 and 1965, few could remember how it had originated. The first steps toward intervention, certainly, had seemed at the time to be little more than minor events on the periphery of the larger Cold War. American aid to French forces

The United States in Latin America, 1954–1990



in Indochina before 1954 had been limited and indirect; the nation's involvement with the Diem regime thereafter, while more substantial, seemed for several years no greater than its involvement with many other Third World governments. But as Diem began to face growing internal opposition, and as the threat from the communists to the north appeared to grow, the United States found itself drawn ever deeper into what would ultimately become widely known as the "quagmire."

Ngo Dinh Diem had been an unfortunate choice as the basis of American hopes for a noncommunist South Vietnam. Autocratic, aristocratic, and corrupt, he staunchly resisted any economic reforms that would weaken the position of the Vietnamese upper class and the power of his own family. A belligerent Roman Catholic in a nation with many Buddhists, he invited dissent through his efforts to limit the influence of the Buddhist religion.

Diem's own limitations intensified problems that would have faced any South Vietnamese ruler,

for the partition of the country in 1954 had never satisfied Ho Chi Minh and his supporters, many of whom had remained in the South. By the late 1950s, therefore, a powerful insurgency was growing in strength in South Vietnam—an insurgency encouraged and supplied in large part by the government of the north. By 1958, a fierce civil war was in progress. And two years later, that war intensified, as communist guerrillas (or Viet Cong, as they were known to their opponents) organized the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF). The NLF had close ties to the government of Ho Chi Minh and, as the war expanded in the ensuing years, received increasing assistance from the north.

Faced with a steadily deteriorating political and military position, Diem appealed to the United States for assistance. The Eisenhower administration increased the flow of weapons and ammunition to South Vietnam during its last years in office and introduced the first few American military advisers to the area—about 650 in all. The Kennedy administra-

tion, with its fervent belief in the importance of fighting communism in emerging areas, expanded that assistance into a major commitment. Despite misgivings about the reliability of Diem, Kennedy substantially increased the flow of munitions into South Vietnam. More important, he raised the number of American military personnel to 15,500.

But the real depth of the American commitment to the war became clear in 1963, when the Diem regime stood on the brink of collapse. The military struggle against the Viet Cong was going badly. Diem's brutal tactics in dispersing Buddhist demonstrators in Saigon had produced a religious crisis as well. Several Buddhist monks burned themselves to death in the streets of the capital, arousing further popular resistance to the government and horrifying the American public, which witnessed the immolations on television. Early in November, after receiving tacit assurances of support from the United States, South Vietnamese military leaders seized control of the government from Diem, executing the deposed president, his brother, and other associates. The Americans had not sanctioned the killings, but they had been instrumental in instigating the coup. Faced with what he considered a choice between allowing South Vietnam to fall and expanding the American involvement, John Kennedy had chosen the latter. Before he could indicate what further steps he was prepared to take, he himself fell victim to an assassin on November 22.

From Aid to Intervention

Lyndon Johnson, therefore, inherited what was already a substantial American commitment to the survival of an anticommunist South Vietnam. During his first two years in office, he expanded that commitment into a full-scale American war. Why he did so has long been a subject of debate. (See "Where Historians Disagree," pp. 906–907.)

Many factors played a role in Johnson's fateful decision. But the most obvious explanation is that the new president faced many pressures to expand the American involvement and only a very few to limit it. As the untested successor to a revered and martyred president, he felt obliged to prove his worthiness for the office by continuing the policies of his predecessor. Aid to South Vietnam had been one of the most prominent of those policies. Johnson also felt it necessary to retain in his administration many of the important figures of the

Kennedy years. In doing so, he surrounded himself with a group of foreign policy advisers—Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy—who believed not only that the United States had an obligation to resist communism in Vietnam but that it possessed the ability and resources to make that resistance successful. As a result, Johnson at times lacked access to information making clear how difficult the new commitment might become. A compliant Congress raised little protest to, and indeed at one point openly endorsed, Johnson's use of executive powers to lead the nation into war. And for several years at least, public opinion remained firmly behind him—in part because Barry Goldwater's bellicose remarks about the war during the 1964 campaign made Johnson seem by comparison to be a moderate on the issue. Above all, intervention in South Vietnam was fully consistent with nearly twenty years of American foreign policy. An anticommunist ally was appealing to the United States for assistance; all the assumptions of the containment doctrine, as it had come to be defined by the 1960s, seemed to require the nation to oblige. Johnson seemed unconcerned that the government of South Vietnam existed largely because the United States had put it there and that the regime had never established full legitimacy among its own people. Vietnam, he believed, provided a test of American willingness to fight communist aggression, a test he was determined not to fail.

During his first months in office, Johnson expanded the American involvement in Vietnam only slightly, introducing an additional 5,000 military advisers there and preparing to send 5,000 more. Then, early in August 1964, the president announced that American destroyers on patrol in international waters in the Gulf of Tonkin had been attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats. Later information raised serious doubts as to whether one of the attacks had actually occurred and, if it had, whether it had been, as the president insisted, "unprovoked." At the time, however, virtually no one questioned Johnson's portrayal of the incident as a serious act of aggression or his insistence that the United States must respond. By a vote of 416 to 0 in the House and 88 to 2 in the Senate (with only Wayne Morse of Oregon and Ernest Gruening of Alaska dissenting), Congress hurriedly passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which authorized the president to "take all necessary measures" to protect American forces and "prevent further aggression" in Southeast Asia. The resolution

WHERE HISTORIANS DISAGREE

The Vietnam Commitment

In 1965 the Department of Defense released a film, intended for American soldiers about to embark for service in Vietnam and designed to explain why the United States had found it necessary to commit so many lives and resources to the defense of a small and distant land. The film was entitled *Why Vietnam?* The question it asked is one many Americans have pondered, and debated, in the two decades since. The debate has proceeded on two levels. At one level, it is an effort to assess the broad objectives that Americans believed they were pursuing in Vietnam. At another, it is an effort to explain how and why policymakers made the specific decisions that led to the American commitment.

The Defense Department film itself offered one answer to the question of America's broad objectives, an answer that for a time most Americans tended to accept: The United States was fighting in Vietnam to defend freedom and stop aggression; and it was fighting in Vietnam to prevent the spread of communism into a new area of the world, to protect not only Vietnam but also the other nations of the Pacific that would soon be threatened if Vietnam itself were to fall. That explanation—that America intervened in Vietnam to defend its ideals and its legitimate interests—continues to attract support. Journalist Norman Podhoretz's 1982 book *Why We Were in Vietnam* argues that America was in Vietnam "to save the Southern half of that country from the evils of communism" and that the tragic events in Indochina since 1975 prove the essential morality of the American cause. Political scientist Guenter Lewy contends, in *America in Vietnam* (1978), that the

United States entered Vietnam to help an ally combat "foreign aggression." R. B. Smith has argued that Vietnam was a vital American interest, that the global concerns of the United States required a commitment there. And historian Ernest R. May has stated: "The paradox is that the Vietnam War, so often condemned by its opponents as hideously immoral, may well have been the most moral or at least the most selfless war in all of American history. For the impulse guiding it was not to defeat an enemy or to serve a national interest; it was simply not to abandon friends."

Others have argued that America's broad objectives in Vietnam were less altruistic, that the intervention was a form of imperialism—part of a larger effort by the United States after World War II to impose a particular political and economic order on the world. "The Vietnam War," historian Gabriel Kolko wrote in *Anatomy of a War* (1985), "was for the United States the culmination of its frustrating postwar effort to merge its arms and politics to halt and reverse the emergence of states and social systems opposed to the international order Washington sought to establish." Economist Robert Heilbroner, writing in 1967, saw the American intent as somewhat more defensive; the intervention in Vietnam was a response to "a fear of losing our place in the sun," to a fear that a communist victory "would signal the end of capitalism as the dominant world order and would force the acknowledgement that America no longer constituted the model on which the future of world civilization would be mainly based."

Those who have looked less at the nation's broad objectives than at the internal workings of

became, in Johnson's view at least, an open-ended legal authorization for escalation of the conflict.

Publicly committed now to the defense of what the United States claimed was an independent, democratic government in the south, the administration had to confront the failure of any faction to establish a stable regime there to replace Diem. With the South Vietnamese leadership in disarray, more and more of the burden of opposition to the Viet Cong fell on the United States. In February 1965, seven marines died

when communist forces attacked an American military base at Pleiku. Johnson retaliated by ordering the first United States bombings of the north, attempting to destroy the depots and transportation lines that were responsible for the flow of North Vietnamese soldiers and supplies into South Vietnam. The bombing continued until 1972, even though there was little evidence that it was effective in limiting North Vietnamese assistance to the NLF.

A month later, in March 1965, two battalions of

WHERE HISTORIANS DISAGREE

the policymaking process have likewise produced competing explanations. Journalist David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest* (1972) argues that policymakers deluded themselves into thinking they could achieve their goals in Vietnam by ignoring, suppressing, or dismissing the information that might have suggested otherwise. The foreign policy leaders of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations were so committed to the idea of American activism and success that they refused to consider the possibility of failure; the Vietnam disaster was thus, at least in part, a result of the arrogance of the nation's leaders.

Larry Berman, a political scientist, offers a somewhat different view in *Planning a Tragedy* (1982). Lyndon Johnson never believed that American prospects in Vietnam were bright or that a real victory was within sight, Berman argues. Johnson was not misled by his advisers. He committed American troops to the war in Vietnam in 1965 not because he expected to win but because he feared that allowing Vietnam to fall would ruin him politically. To do otherwise, Johnson believed, would destroy his hopes for winning approval of his Great Society legislation at home.

Leslie H. Gelb (who as an official in the Defense Department in the 1960s directed the writing of the official study of the war that became known as the Pentagon Papers) has produced another, related explanation for American intervention, which sees the roots of the involvement in the larger imperatives of the American foreign policy system. In *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked*, published in 1979 and written in collaboration with political scientist Richard K. Betts,

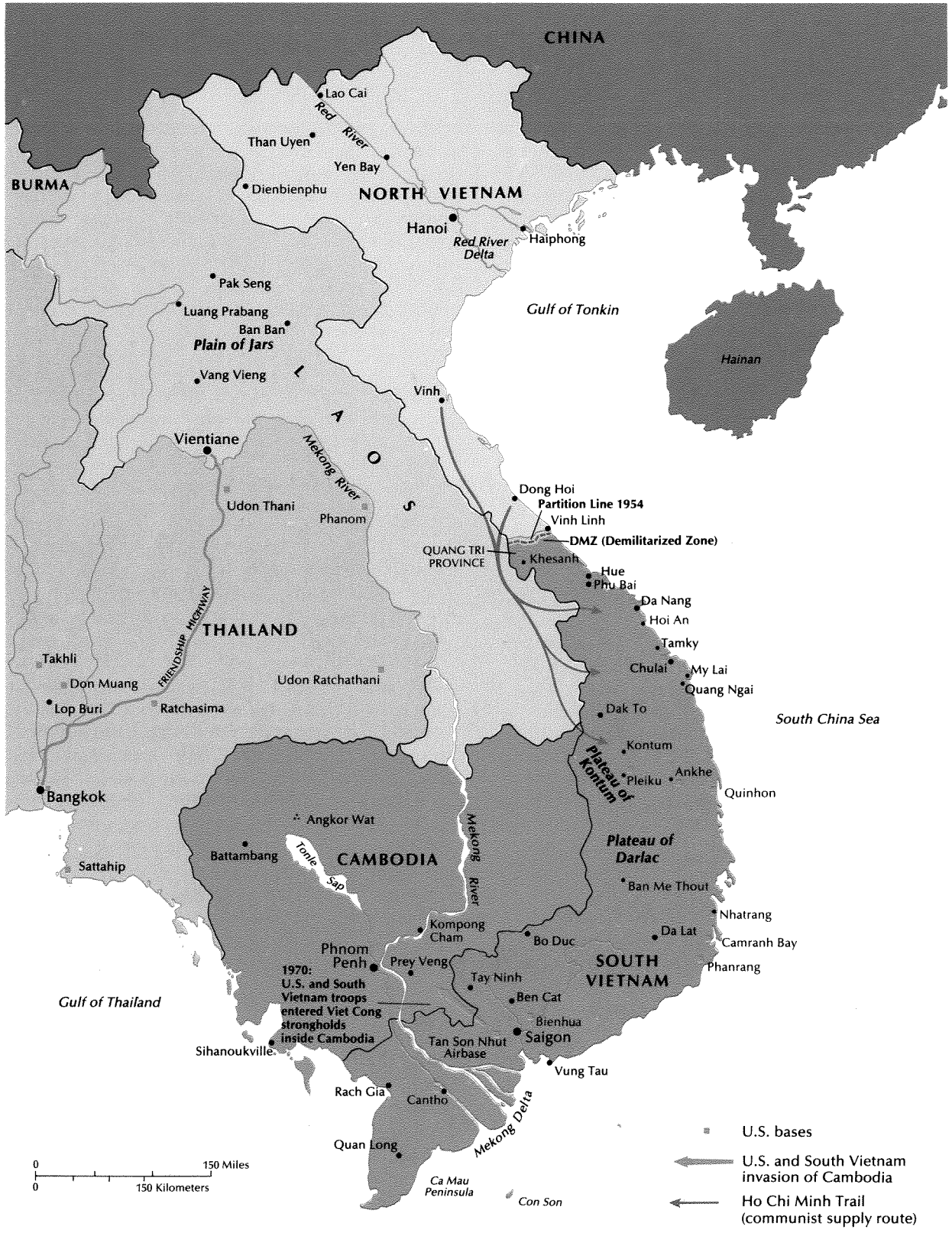
Gelb argues that intervention in Vietnam was the logical, perhaps even inevitable result of a political and bureaucratic order shaped by certain ideological assumptions. The American foreign policy system was wedded to the doctrine of containment and operated, therefore, in response to a single, overriding imperative: the need to prevent the expansion of communism.

The United States, Gelb maintains, stumbled into a commitment to a shaky government in South Vietnam in the 1950s, and the unvarying policy of every subsequent administration until 1975 was to do what was necessary to prevent the collapse of that government. They were doing so not because they anticipated victory but because they saw no alternative. However high the costs of intervention, they believed, the costs of not intervening, of allowing South Vietnam to fall, would be higher. At every step, American presidents did the minimum they thought necessary to stave off the collapse of South Vietnam. In the 1950s and early 1960s, that meant modest economic and military assistance. In the mid-1960s, as the military situation worsened, the same commitment required the introduction of American troops in large numbers. Only when the national and international political situation had shifted to the point where it was possible for American policymakers to reassess the costs of the commitment—to conclude that the costs of allowing Vietnam to fall were less than the costs of continuing the commitment (a shift that began to occur in the early 1970s)—was it possible for the United States to begin disengaging.

American marines landed at Da Nang in South Vietnam. Although Johnson continued to insist that he was not leading the United States into a ground war in Southeast Asia, there were now more than 100,000 American troops in Vietnam. The following July, finally, the president publicly admitted that the character of the war had changed. American soldiers would now, he announced, begin playing an active role in the conduct of the war. By the end of the year, there were more than 180,000 American combat

troops in Vietnam; in 1966, that number doubled; and by the end of 1967, there were nearly 500,000 American soldiers fighting on the ground, while the air war had intensified until the tonnage of bombs dropped ultimately exceeded that in Europe during World War II. Meanwhile, American casualties were mounting. In 1961, 14 Americans had died in Vietnam; in 1963, the toll was 489. By the spring of 1966, more than 4,000 Americans had been killed; and they were continuing to die at a faster rate than soldiers in

The War in Vietnam and Indochina, 1964-1975



“Walking the High Ground” in Vietnam

An American patrol makes its way along the raised earthen pathways that thread through flooded rice paddies in South Vietnam. The Vietnamese landscape, unfamiliar to American soldiers (and to the commanders planning tactics and strategy), was itself a significant factor in frustrating American war aims. (UPI/Bettmann Newsphotos)



the ineffective South Vietnamese army. Yet the gains resulting from the carnage had been negligible. The United States had finally succeeded in 1965 in creating a reasonably stable government in the south under General Nguyen Van Thieu. But the new regime was hardly less corrupt or brutal than its predecessors, and no more able than they to maintain control over its own countryside. The Viet Cong, not the Thieu regime, controlled the majority of South Vietnam's villages and hamlets.

The Quagmire

For more than seven years, therefore, American combat forces remained bogged down in a war that the United States was never able either to win or fully to understand. Combating a foe whose strength lay not in weaponry but in a pervasive infiltration of the population, the United States responded with the kind of heavy-handed technological warfare designed for conventional battles against conventional armies. American forces succeeded in winning most of the major battles in which they became engaged, routing the Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese allies from such strongholds as Dak To, Con Thien, and later, Khe Sanh. There were astounding (if not always reliable) casualty figures showing that far more communists than Americans were dying in combat—statistics that the United States military referred to as a “favorable kill ratio.” There was a continuing

stream of optimistic reports, from American military commanders, civilian officials, and others, that the war was progressing—including the famous words of Secretary of Defense McNamara that he could “see the light at the end of the tunnel.” But if the war was not actually being lost, neither was it being won. It was, moreover, becoming a war that critics argued could not be won.

At the heart of the problem was that the United States was not fighting an army as much as a popular movement. The Viet Cong derived their strength in part from the aid they received from North Vietnam and, indirectly, from the Soviet Union and China. Equally important, however, was their success in mobilizing members of the native population—men, women, and even children—who were indistinguishable from their neighbors and who fought not only openly in major battles but covertly through sabotage, ambush, and terror. American troops might drive Viet Cong forces from a particular village or city; but as soon as the Americans left, the NLF forces would return. The frustrations of this kind of warfare mounted steadily, until the United States found itself involved in a series of desperate strategies.

Central to the American war effort was the heralded “pacification” program, designed in part by General William Westmoreland, whose purpose was to rout the Viet Cong from particular regions and then “pacify” those regions by winning the “hearts and minds” of the people. Routing the Viet Cong was often possible, but the subsequent pacification

was more difficult. American forces were usually incapable of establishing the same kind of rapport with provincial Vietnamese that the highly nationalistic Viet Cong forces were able to achieve.

Gradually, therefore, the pacification program gave way to the more desperate "relocation" strategy. Instead of attempting to win the loyalty of the peasants in areas in which the Viet Cong were operating, American troops would uproot the villagers from their homes, send them fleeing to refugee camps or into the cities (producing by 1967 more than 3 million refugees), and then destroy the vacated villages and surrounding countryside. Saturation bombing, bulldozing of settlements, chemical defoliation of fields and jungles—all were designed to eliminate possible Viet Cong sanctuaries. But the Viet Cong responded simply by moving to new sanctuaries elsewhere. The futility of the United States effort was suggested by the statement of an American officer after flattening one such hamlet that it had been "necessary to destroy [the village] in order to save it."

As the war dragged on and victory remained elusive, some American officers and officials began to urge the president to expand military efforts in Indochina. Some argued for heavier bombing and increased troop strength; others insisted that the United States attack communist enclaves in surrounding countries; a few began to urge the use of nuclear weapons. The Johnson administration, however, resisted. Unwilling to abandon its commitment to South Vietnam for fear of destroying American "credibility" in the world, the government was also unwilling to expand the war too far, for fear of provoking direct intervention by the Chinese, the Soviets, or both. Caught in a trap largely of his own making, the president began to encounter additional obstacles and frustrations at home.

The War at Home

Few Americans, and even fewer influential ones, had protested the American involvement in Vietnam as late as the end of 1965. But as the war dragged on and its futility began to become apparent, political support for it began to erode. At first, the attack emerged from the perimeters of politics: for intellectuals, from students, and from the press. By the end of 1967, the debate over the war had moved fully into the mainstream of national public life.

Many of the earliest objections to the war emerged on college and university campuses. Politi-

cal scientists, historians, Asian experts, and others began in 1965 to raise questions about both the wisdom and the morality of the Vietnam adventure, arguing that it reflected, among other things, a fundamental American misunderstanding of politics and society in Southeast Asia. A series of "teach-ins" on university campuses, beginning at the University of Michigan in 1965, sparked a national debate over the war, before such debate developed inside the government. Such pacifist organizations as the American Friends Service Committee and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom organized early protests. By the end of 1967, American students opposed to the war had grown so numerous and so vocal as to form a major political force. Enormous peace marches in New York, Washington, D.C., and other cities drew increasing public attention to the antiwar movement. Campus demonstrations occurred almost daily. A growing number of journalists, particularly reporters who had spent time in Vietnam, helped sustain the movement with their frank revelations about the brutality and apparent futility of the war.

The chorus of popular protest soon began to stimulate opposition to the war from within the government itself. Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas, chairman of the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee, became one of the earliest influential public figures to turn against the war. Beginning in January 1966, he began to stage highly publicized and occasionally televised congressional hearings to air criticisms of the war, summoning as witnesses such distinguished public figures as George F. Kennan and General James Gavin. Other prominent members of Congress joined Fulbright in opposing Johnson's policies—including, in 1967, Robert F. Kennedy, brother of the slain president, then a senator from New York. Even within the administration, the consensus seemed to be crumbling. Secretary of State Rusk remained a true believer until the end; but McGeorge Bundy and Robert McNamara, both of whom had used their political and intellectual talents to extend the American involvement in Vietnam, quietly left the government in 1967 and 1968. Bundy's successor, Walt W. Rostow, was if anything even more committed to the war than his predecessor and one-time mentor. But the new secretary of defense, Clark Clifford, became a powerful voice within the administration on behalf of a cautious scaling down of the commitment.

Other factors weakened the position of supporters of the war as well. America's most important

allies—Great Britain, France, West Germany, and Japan—all began to criticize the Vietnam involvement. Of more immediate concern, the American economy was beginning to suffer. Johnson's commitment to fighting the war while continuing his Great Society reforms—his promise of “guns and butter”—proved impossible to maintain. The inflation rate, which had remained at 2 percent through most of the early 1960s, rose to 3 percent in 1967, 4 percent in 1968, and 6 percent in 1969. In August 1967, Johnson asked Congress for a tax increase—a 10 percent surcharge that was widely labeled a “war tax”—which he knew was necessary if the nation was to avoid even more ruinous inflation. In return, congressional conservatives demanded and received a \$6 billion reduction in the funding for Great Society programs. The war in Vietnam, in other words, was now not only a source of concern for its own sake. It had also become a direct threat to liberal efforts to redress social injustices at home.

The Traumas of 1968

By the end of 1967, the twin crises of the war in Vietnam and the deteriorating racial situation at home, crises that fed upon and inflamed each other, had helped create deep social and political tension. In the course of 1968, those tensions seemed suddenly to burst to the surface and threaten national chaos. Not since World War II had the United States experienced so profound a sense of crisis. Perhaps never before in its history had the nation suffered as many traumatic shocks in such short order.

The Tet Offensive

On January 31, 1968, the first day of the Vietnamese New Year (Tet), Viet Cong forces launched an enormous, concerted attack on American strongholds throughout South Vietnam. The attack displayed a strength that American commanders had long insisted the Viet Cong did not possess. Some major cities, most notably Hue, fell to the communists. Others suffered major disruptions. But what made the Tet offensive genuinely shocking to the American people, who saw vivid reports of it on television, was what happened in Saigon. If any place in South Vietnam had seemed secure from enemy attack, it

was the capital city. Now, suddenly, Viet Cong forces were in the heart of Saigon, setting off bombs, shooting down South Vietnamese officials and troops, and holding down fortified areas.

Even more chilling was the evidence the Tet offensive gave of the brutality of the fighting in Vietnam, of the savagery it seemed to have aroused in those who became involved in it. In the midst of the Tet offensive, television cameras recorded the sight of a captured Viet Cong guerrilla being led up to a South Vietnamese officer in the streets of Saigon. Without a word, the officer pulled out his pistol and shot the young guerrilla through the head, leaving him lying dead with his blood pouring onto the street. No single event did more to undermine support in the United States for the war. American forces soon dislodged the Viet Cong from most of the positions they had seized, and the Tet offensive in the end cost the communists such appalling casualties that they were significantly weakened for months to come. Indeed, the Tet defeats permanently depleted the ranks of the NLF and forced North Vietnamese troops to take on a much larger share of the subsequent fighting. But all that had little impact on American opinion. Tet may have been a military victory for the United States; but it was a political defeat for the administration, a defeat from which it would never fully recover.

In the weeks that followed, many of the pillars of American public opinion finally began to move into opposition to the war. Leading newspapers began taking editorial stands in favor of deescalation of the conflict. *Time*, *Newsweek*, and other national magazines began running searing exposés and urging American withdrawal. Network commentators began voicing open doubts about the wisdom of American policies. Within weeks of the Tet offensive, public opposition to the war had almost doubled. And Johnson's personal popularity rating had slid to 35 percent, the lowest of any president since Harry Truman.

The Political Challenge

As early as the summer of 1967, dissident Democrats had been attempting to mobilize support behind an antiwar candidate who would challenge Lyndon Johnson in the 1968 primaries. For many months, they tried to enlist Senator Robert Kennedy, the most widely known critic of the war. But mindful of the difficulties in challenging an incumbent president,

Kennedy declined. In his stead, the dissidents recruited Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, a subdued, cerebral candidate who avoided heated rhetoric in favor of carefully reasoned argument and attracted a particularly devoted following among college students. A brilliantly orchestrated campaign by young volunteers in the New Hampshire primary produced a startling showing by McCarthy in March; he came within 1 percentage point of outpolling the president.

A few days later, Robert Kennedy finally entered the campaign, deeply embittering many of those who had dedicated themselves to the cause of McCarthy, but bringing his own substantial strength among blacks, poor people, and workers to the antiwar cause. Polls showed the president trailing badly in the next scheduled primary, in Wisconsin. Public animosity toward Johnson was such that he did not dare venture from the White House to campaign. On March 31, Johnson went on television to announce a limited halt in the bombing of North Vietnam—his first major concession to the antiwar forces—and, much more surprising, his withdrawal from the presidential contest.

For a moment, it seemed as though the antiwar forces had won—that nothing could stop them from seizing the Democratic presidential nomination and even the presidency itself. Robert Kennedy quickly established himself as the champion of the Democratic primaries, winning one election after another. In the meantime, however, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, with the support of President Johnson, entered the contest and began to attract the support of party leaders and of the many delegations that were selected not by popular primaries but by state party organizations. He soon appeared to be the front runner in the race.

The King Assassination

In the midst of this bitter political battle, in which the war had been the dominant issue, the attention of the nation suddenly turned again to the matter of race in response to a shocking tragedy. On April 4, Martin Luther King, Jr., who had traveled to Memphis, Tennessee, to lend his support to a strike by black sanitation workers in the city, was shot and killed while standing on the balcony of his motel. The assassin, James Earl Ray, who was captured days later in London, had no apparent motive. Later evidence suggested that he had been hired by others to do the

killing, but he himself never revealed the identity of his employers.

The tragic death of King, who had remained the most widely admired black leader among both blacks and whites, deeply affected Americans of all races, producing an outpouring of grief matched in recent memory only by the reaction to the death of John Kennedy. Among blacks, however, it also produced widespread anger. In the days after the assassination, major riots broke out in more than sixty American cities. Forty-three people died; more than 3,000 suffered injuries; as many as 27,000 people were arrested. None of these riots was as intense as some earlier disturbances, but together the disorders were the greatest single manifestation of racial unrest in the nation's history.

The Kennedy Assassination and Chicago

Robert Kennedy continued his campaign for the presidential nomination. Late in the night of June 6, he appeared in the ballroom of a Los Angeles hotel to acknowledge the cheers of his supporters for his victory in that day's California primary. Waiting for him in a back room, in the meantime, was Sirhan Sirhan, a young Palestinian who had become enraged, apparently, by pro-Israeli remarks Kennedy had made several days earlier in a televised debate with Eugene McCarthy. As Kennedy was leaving the ballroom after his victory statement, Sirhan emerged from a crowd and shot him in the head. Early the next morning, Kennedy died.

By the time of his death, Robert Kennedy—who earlier in his career had been widely considered a cold, ruthless agent of his more appealing brother—had emerged as a figure of enormous popular appeal. More than John Kennedy, Robert identified his hopes with the American “underclass”—with blacks, Hispanics, Indians, the poor—and with the many American liberals who were coming to believe that the problems of such groups demanded attention. Indeed, it was Robert Kennedy more than John who shaped what some would later call the “Kennedy legacy” and what would for a time become central to American liberalism: the fervent commitment to using government to help the powerless. In addition, Robert had an impassioned following among many people who saw in him (and his family) the kind of glamour and hopefulness they had come, at least in retrospect, to identify with the martyred president.



The Battle of Chicago, 1968

City police battle young antiwar demonstrators in downtown Chicago on August 28, 1968, while the Democratic National Convention was meeting to nominate a presidential candidate less than a mile away. The media expressed horror at the violence of the police, but opinion polls later revealed that a majority of the American people was more hostile toward the demonstrators. (UPI/Bettmann Newsphotos)

His campaign appearances inspired outbursts of public enthusiasm rarely seen in political life.

The passions Kennedy aroused made his violent death a particularly shattering experience for the American people. In reality, he had been the victim of a single, apparently crazed individual. But to much of the nation, stunned and bewildered by yet another public tragedy, Kennedy seemed to have been a victim of national social chaos.

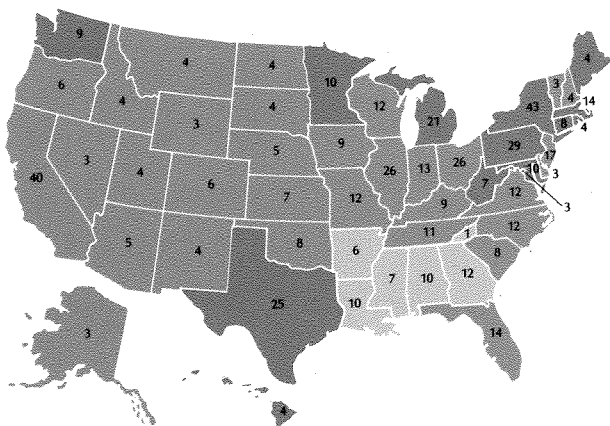
The presidential campaign continued gloomily during the last weeks before the convention. Hubert Humphrey, who had seemed likely to win the nomination even before Robert Kennedy's death, now faced only minor opposition. Despite the embittered claims of many Democrats that Humphrey would simply continue the bankrupt policies of the Johnson administration, there seemed no possibility of stopping him. The approaching Democratic Convention, therefore, began to take on the appearance of an exer-

cise in futility; and antiwar activists, despairing of winning any victories within the convention, began to plan major demonstrations outside it.

When the Democrats finally gathered in Chicago in August, even the most optimistic observers were predicting a turbulent convention. Inside the hall, carefully sealed off from all demonstrators by Mayor Richard Daley, delegates engaged in a long, bitter debate over an antiwar plank that both Kennedy and McCarthy supporters wanted to insert in the platform. Miles away, in a downtown park, thousands of students and other antiwar protesters had set up camps and were staging demonstrations. On the third night of the convention, as the delegates were beginning their balloting on the now virtually inevitable nomination of Hubert Humphrey, demonstrators and police clashed in a bloody riot in the streets of Chicago. Hundreds of protesters were injured as police attempted to disperse them with tear

Election of 1968

(60.6% of electorate voting)



	ELECTORAL VOTE	POPULAR VOTE (%)
Richard M. Nixon (Republican)	301	31,770,237 (43.4)
Hubert H. Humphrey (Democratic)	191	31,270,533 (42.7)
George C. Wallace (American Independence)	46	9,906,141 (13.5)
Other candidates (Socialist Labor; D. Gregory; Socialist Workers; Peace and Freedom; McCarthy; Prohibition)	—	218,347

gas and billy clubs. Aware that the violence was being televised to the nation, the demonstrators taunted the authorities with the chant, "The whole world is watching!" And Hubert Humphrey, who had spent years dreaming of becoming his party's candidate for president, received a nomination that night which appeared at the time to be almost worthless.

The Conservative Response

The turbulent events of 1968 persuaded many observers that American society was on the verge of a fundamental social upheaval. Newspapers, magazines, the press—all helped create the impression of a nation in the throes of revolutionary change. In fact, however, the prevailing response of the American people to the turmoil was a conservative one.

The most visible sign of the conservative backlash was the surprising success of the campaign of

George Wallace for the presidency. Wallace had established himself in 1963 as one of the leading spokesmen for the defense of segregation when, as governor of Alabama, he had attempted to block the admission of black students to the University of Alabama. In 1968, he became a third-party candidate for president, basing his campaign on a host of conservative grievances. Although he tempered some of his earlier positions on the race issue, he continued to appeal to those who resented the intrusion of the federal government into local affairs. He denounced the forced busing of students, the proliferation of government regulations and social programs, and the permissiveness of authorities toward race riots and antiwar demonstrations. He chose as his running mate a retired air force general, Curtis LeMay, who was a bellicose advocate of expanding the war in Vietnam. There was never any serious chance that Wallace would win the election; but his remarkable standing in the polls over many months—rising at times to over 20 percent of those interviewed—was a clear indication that he had struck a responsive chord.

A more effective effort to mobilize the "silent majority" in favor of order and stability was under way within the Republican party. Richard Nixon, whose political career had seemed at an end after his losses in the presidential race of 1960 and a California gubernatorial campaign two years later, reemerged as the preeminent spokesman for "Middle America." Although he avoided the crudeness and stridency of the Wallace campaign, he skillfully exploited many of the same concerns that were sustaining the Alabama governor. Nixon was more perceptive than many other leaders in realizing that many Americans were now tired of hearing about their obligations to the poor, tired of hearing about the sacrifices necessary to achieve racial justice, tired of judicial reforms that seemed designed to help criminals. By offering a vision of stability, law and order, government retrenchment, and "peace with honor" in Vietnam, he easily captured the nomination of his party for the presidency. And after the spectacle of the Democratic Convention, he and his running mate, Governor Spiro Agnew of Maryland, enjoyed a commanding lead in the polls as the November election approached.

That lead diminished greatly in the last weeks before the voting. Old doubts about Nixon's character—doubts based in part on the sometimes vicious anticommunism of his earlier career—continued to haunt the Republican candidate. A skillful last-minute surge by Hubert Humphrey, who

SIGNIFICANT EVENTS

- 1960** John F. Kennedy elected president (p. 886) *
Greensboro sit-ins (p. 894) *
- 1961** Freedom rides (p. 894) *
United States supports failed invasion of Bay of Pigs (p. 901)
Kennedy meets Khrushchev in Vienna (p. 901)
Berlin Wall erected (p. 901)
Peace Corps established (p. 901)
Alliance for Progress established (p. 901)
- 1962** Steel price increase provokes controversy (p. 887)
Kennedy proposes tax cut to stimulate economy (p. 887)
Desegregation crisis at University of Mississippi (p. 895)
Cuban missile crisis (p. 902)
- 1963** Martin Luther King, Jr., begins Birmingham campaign (p. 895)
Desegregation crisis at University of Alabama (p. 896)
Kennedy proposes civil-rights bill (p. 896) *
March on Washington (p. 896) *
Test ban treaty signed (p. 903)
Diem toppled by coup in Vietnam (p. 905)
Kennedy assassinated; Lyndon B. Johnson becomes president (p. 888) *
- 1964** Johnson launches war on poverty (p. 891) *
Congress passes tax cut (p. 893) *
"Freedom summer" campaign in Mississippi (p. 896)
Congress passes Civil Rights Act (p. 896) *
Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passed (p. 905)
United States begins bombing of North Vietnam (p. 906)
Johnson elected president by record margin (p. 890)
- 1965** Medicare enacted (p. 891) *
Elementary and Secondary Education Act passed (p. 892)
Selma campaign for voting rights (p. 897) *
Race riot breaks out in Watts, Los Angeles (p. 899)
Malcolm X publishes *Autobiography* (p. 900) *
Malcolm X assassinated (p. 900) *
Congress passes Voting Rights Act (p. 898) *
United States intervenes in Dominican Republic (p. 903)
American combat troops sent to Vietnam (p. 907)
Immigration Act passed (p. 893) *
- 1966** Medicaid enacted (p. 891) *
King leads Chicago campaign (p. 898) *
Senate Foreign Relations Committee holds hearings on Vietnam (p. 910)
- 1967** Johnson requests tax increase (p. 911)
Race riot breaks out in Detroit (p. 899) *
- 1968** Department of Labor issues affirmative action rules (p. 898)
Viet Cong launch Tet offensive (p. 911) *
Johnson withdraws from presidential contest (p. 912)
Martin Luther King, Jr., assassinated (p. 912) *
Racial violence breaks out in American cities (p. 912)
Robert Kennedy assassinated (p. 912) *
Demonstrators clash with police at Democratic National Convention (p. 913)
George Wallace launches third-party presidential campaign (p. 914)
Richard M. Nixon elected president (p. 915) *

somehow managed to restore at least a tenuous unity to the Democratic party, narrowed the gap further. And the continuing appeal of George Wallace appeared to be hurting the Republicans more than the Democrats. In the end, however, Nixon eked out a victory almost as narrow as his defeat in 1960. He received 43.4 percent of the popular vote to Humphrey's 42.7 percent (a margin of only about 500,000 votes), and 301 electoral votes to Humphrey's 191.

George Wallace, who like most third-party candidates faded in the last weeks of the campaign, still managed to poll 13.5 percent of the popular vote and to carry five Southern states with a total of 46 electoral ballots. Nixon had hardly won a decisive mandate. But the election had made one thing clear. The majority of the American people were more interested in the restoration of stability than in fundamental social change.

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