CHAPTER 37

The Stormy Sixties, 1963–1973

# focus questions

1. How did President Johnson deal with the civil rights issue? What were his goals and were these goals actualized by the end of the decade?

2. What role did President Johnson have in the Vietnam conflict?

3. What were the major goals of Johnson’s Great Society? How successful were they?

4. How did Nixon’s foreign policy of détente differ from previous administrations? How did détente help or hurt relations with China and the Soviet Union?

5. How did the Vietnam conflict escalate under the Nixon administration?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** Johnson’s massive escalation of the war in Vietnam failed to defeat the Communist Vietnamese forces, while growing domestic opposition finally forced him from power.

**Theme:** The Kennedy administration’s domestic stalemate ended in the mid-1960s, as Johnson’s Great Society and the black civil rights movement brought a tide of liberal social reform. But the diversion of resources and the social upheavals caused by the Vietnam War wrecked the Great Society.

chapter summary

Johnson succeeded Kennedy and overwhelmingly defeated Goldwater. The black movement for integration and voting rights won great victories. Johnson used his huge congressional majorities to push through a mass of liberal Great Society legislation. Northern black ghettos erupted in violence amid calls for black power.

Johnson escalated military involvement in Vietnam. As the number of troops and casualties grew without producing military success, dovish protests against the war gained strength. Political opposition forced Johnson not to seek reelection, and the deep Democratic divisions over the war allowed Nixon to win the White House.

Nixon’s Vietnamization policy reduced American ground participation in the war, but his Cambodia invasion sparked massive protest. Nixon’s journeys to Communist Moscow and Beijing (Peking) established a new rapprochement with these powers. In domestic policy, Nixon and the Supreme Court promoted affirmative action and environmental protection.

The 1972 election victory and the cease-fire in Vietnam were negated when Nixon became bogged down in the Watergate scandal and congressional protest over the secret bombing of Cambodia, which led to the War Powers Act. The Middle East War of 1973 and the Arab oil embargo created energy and economic difficulties that lasted through the decade. Americans gradually awoke to their costly and dangerous dependence on Middle Eastern oil and began to take tentative steps toward conservation and alternative energy sources.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Examine the black movements of the sixties, from civil rights to black power, perhaps focusing on the fact that the nonviolent movement’s great successes in integration and voting rights were not considered adequate by those trapped in northern black ghettos.

REFERENCE: Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954–1980* (1981).

* Describe the escalation of the Vietnam War. Explain the political as well as the military side of the war (for example, the constant fear that the Saigon government would collapse if the United States did not provide greater support).

REFERENCES: Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (1983); Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990* (1991).

* Consider the domestic political and social turmoil of the sixties, brought on by social and cultural upheavals as well as Vietnam. Point out the deep polarization of American society, as evidenced by the turbulent events of 1968.

REFERENCES: Allen Matusow, *The Unraveling of America* (1984); Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (2000).

* Analyze the ebb and flow of American foreign policy in the early seventies. Particular attention might be paid to the difficulties in implementing Kissinger’s plans for a stabilizing agreement among the three great powers in a still-volatile world.

REFERENCES: Robert D. Schulzinger, *Henry Kissinger: Doctor of Diplomacy* (1989)

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Use Martin Luther King Jr.’s life and work to explain the principles of the nonviolent civil rights movement. Perhaps show how King came under assault from some whites and blacks during his lifetime for being either too militant or not militant enough.
* Discuss the causes and consequences of the Vietnam War. Consider why it so divided American society. (See boxed quotes on pages 900 and 906.)
* Examine the cultural rebellions of the 1960s in relation to traditional American values such as distrust of authority and individualism. Examine the sexual revolution and the changes in the family as they impacted broader issues of public authority and the role of institutions like the school and church. (See section Thinking Globally on pages 896-897.)
* Conduct a class debate on topics such as U.S. Actions in Vietnam Are Justified and America’s Youth Must Lead a New Revolution. Primary source readings will come from the following book: *Opposing Viewpoints in American History—Volume II: From Reconstruction to the Present*, San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1996. Another good source of debate topics is Larry Madaras and James M. SoRelle, *Taking Sides—Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in American History, Volume II: Reconstruction to the Present*, Connecticut: McGraw-Hill, 2000.
* Have the students read Daniel Bell’s “The End of Ideology in the West” (1960) in David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper’s (Editors), *The American Intellectual Tradition: Volume II—1865 to the Present*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
* Have the students read Martin Luther King Jr.'s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963) and Malcolm X’s “The Ballot or the Bullet” (1964) in David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper’s (Editors) *The American Intellectual Tradition: Volume II—1865 to the Present*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
* Have the students read Betty Friedan’s “Selection from *The Feminine Mystique”* (1963) in David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper’s (Editors), *The American Intellectual Tradition: Volume II—1865 to the Present*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
* Have the students watch the following movies *Malcolm X*, *JFK*, *Nixon*, *Thirteen Days*, and *All the President’s Men*.
* Have the students explore the programs of Johnson in James MacGregor Burns (Editor), *To Heal and to Build—The Programs of President Lyndon B. Johnson* (1968).
* Have the students watch the presidential campaign commercials, The Living Room Candidate, (http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/index.php, last accessed September 2014).

# character sketches

## Lyndon Baines Johnson (1908–1973)

Johnson was a highly skilled Senate majority leader in the 1950s and was frustrated by his powerlessness as Kennedy’s vice president.

The son of a flamboyant Texas state senator, Lyndon often joined him amid the colorful, corrupt atmosphere of Austin. Johnson’s first venture into politics came at San Marcos Teachers’ College, where he formed a student political group, the White Stars, to take control of campus activities and jobs from a rival group, the Black Stars.

Johnson briefly taught high school in Houston and organized successful student debate teams that traveled all over the state. He became a congressional assistant in Washington and learned to imitate the congressman’s voice on the phone well enough to carry on extensive conversations with callers.

Roosevelt treated Johnson as a special young protégé and invited him to go sailing as a particular favor. Johnson lost his first Senate race in 1941 but won his next try in 1948 by eighty-seven votes—a result that earned him the nickname “Landslide Lyndon.”

**Quote:** “I knew from the start that I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the woman I loved—the Great Society—in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home. All my programs, all my dreams. But if I left that war and let the communists take over South Vietnam, then I would be seen as a coward and my nation would be seen as an appeaser and we would find it impossible to accomplish anything for anyone anywhere on the entire globe.” (Conversation, 1970)

REFERENCE: Robert Dallek, *Lone Star Rising: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1908–1960* (1991).

## Martin Luther King Jr. (1928–1968)

King was much criticized in his lifetime, but in 1986, his birthday began to be celebrated as a national holiday—the first such honor given to a black American.

He came from a long line of Baptist preachers. His father, Martin Luther King Sr., was pastor at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, and Martin Jr. was for a time copastor with him.

King and his wife, Coretta Scott, both came from the middle-class Atlanta black community. He experienced sharper discrimination when he went north to study theology. King earned his doctorate from Boston University with a dissertation on the doctrine of God and also studied the nonviolent teachings of Gandhi. Later, he and his wife visited India to learn more about Gandhian techniques.

During King’s civil rights campaign in Chicago in 1966, he lived in a ghetto slum on the West Side. His outspoken attacks on the Vietnam War caused considerable criticism that he was not sticking to civil rights issues. At the time of his assassination, he was conducting a campaign for black garbage workers in Memphis.

**Quote:** “When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of that old Negro spiritual, ‘Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!’” (“I Have a Dream” speech, 1963)

REFERENCE: David L. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*: *Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (1986).

## Robert Francis Kennedy (1925–1968)

Kennedy was the younger brother of President John Kennedy who became a leader of the anti–Vietnam War movement before his assassination during the presidential campaign of 1968.

The third of the Kennedy brothers, Robert had great difficulty keeping up with his older, favored brothers Joseph Jr. and John. For much of his political career he operated in the background as John Kennedy’s political manager and adviser.

Kennedy was long distrusted by liberals because of his association with Senator Joseph McCarthy and by labor because of his involvement with Senate committees investigating union racketeering. During his years as attorney general (1961–1964), he carried on a fierce prosecution of Teamster boss James Hoffa and eventually saw him convicted.

Kennedy became deeply depressed after his brother’s assassination, but revived once he resigned as attorney general and won election as a U.S. senator from New York in 1964. He disliked Johnson intensely, but at first hesitated to break with him because he thought Johnson would regard Kennedy’s antiwar position as a purely personal vendetta.

**Quote:** “Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation.” (*To Seek a Newer World,* 1967)

REFERENCE: Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *Robert F. Kennedy and His Times* (1978).

## Richard Nixon (1913–1994)

Nixon was the most controversial politician of his generation and has remained a source of intrigue and puzzlement for scholars and the public.

The second of five sons of a devout Quaker family, Nixon was third in his class of twenty-five at Duke Law School. He wanted to be an FBI agent but instead became a local California attorney and later joined the Office of Price Administration and the navy.

He defeated Jerry Voorhis, a prominent New Deal Democratic congressman, in 1946 and won national fame for his work on the Hiss case. His 1950 campaign against Helen Gahagan Douglas was dominated by his red-baiting charges against her.

Thomas Dewey promoted Nixon for the vice presidency in 1952. His 1962 defeat for the California governorship was generally considered to have marked the end of his political career, so his recovery to win the 1968 GOP nomination was nearly miraculous.

**Quote:** “You won’t have Nixon to kick around anymore, because gentlemen, this is my last press conference.” (Press conference after election loss, 1962)

REFERENCES: Joan Hoff Wilson, *Nixon Reconsidered* (1994); Rachel Barron, *Richard Nixon* (1999).

## Henry Kissinger (1923– )

At the height of his power in the 1970s, Kissinger exercised more influence over American foreign policy than any secretary of state since George Marshall, and perhaps since William Seward.

Born in southern Germany, the son of a high school teacher, Heinz Kissinger (his original name) was frequently beaten up by anti-Semitic gangs. His father lost his job, and the family was forced to flee to the United States in 1938. Many writers have seen a connection between the instability of Kissinger’s youth and his strong pursuit of order and stability in international relations.

His family never fully assimilated to America, and Kissinger retained his thick German accent throughout his life. In the U.S. Army, he became a translator and eventually administered a small district in occupied Germany.

His book *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (1957), which advocated the use of limited nuclear weapons, brought him to the attention of Nelson Rockefeller and began his career as an influential foreign-policy and defense theorist.

**Quote:** “The deepest international conflict in the world today is not between us and the Soviet Union, but between the Soviet Union and Communist China.… Therefore, one of the positive prospects in the current situation is that, whatever the basic intentions of Soviet leaders, confronted with the prospect of a China growing in strength…they may want a period of détente in the West.”

REFERENCE: Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (1993).

# great debates in american history

## Great Debate (1961–1973):

Vietnam. Should the United States fight a major war in Vietnam in order to save the anticommunist government of South Vietnam from falling to the Communist Vietnamese?

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| ***Yes:*** Vietnam “hawks,” led by President Johnson and his administration; the Cold War foreign-policy establishment; many political conservatives, led by Barry Goldwater and Richard Nixon; many labor groups, led by George Meany. |  | ***No:*** Vietnam “doves,” led by Senators Morse, Fulbright, and McCarthy; some foreign-policy experts, led by George Kennan, Walter Lippmann, and Hans Morgenthau; many students and other young people. |

ISSUE #1: Should the United States fight a war to preserve freedom and independence for the South Vietnamese anticommunists?

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| ***Yes:*** “Hawk” President Johnson: “The first reality is that North Vietnam has attacked the independent nation of South Vietnam. Its object is total conquest.… Women and children are strangled in the night because their men are loyal to their government. And helpless villages are ravaged by sneak attack.… Our objective is the independence of South Vietnam and its freedom from attack. We want nothing for ourselves—only that the people of South Vietnam be allowed to guide their country in their own way.” |  | ***No:*** “Dove” journalist Neil Sheehan: “The regimes [of South Vietnam] were and are composed of men…who are allied with mandarin families.… Most of the men who rule Saigon have, like the Bourbons, learned nothing and forgotten nothing. They seek to retain what privileges they have and to regain those they have lost.… The Communist party is the one truly national organization that permeates both North and South Vietnam. The men who lead the party today…directed the struggle for independence from France and in the process captured much of the deeply felt nationalism of the Vietnamese people.” |

ISSUE #2: Should the United States fight a war in Vietnam to prevent the spread of communism to the rest of Asia and beyond?

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| ***Yes:*** “Hawk” President Johnson: “Let no one suppose that a retreat from Vietnam would bring an end to conflict. The battle would be renewed in one country and then another. The central lesson of our time is that the appetite of aggression is never satisfied.… There are those who say that all our effort there will be futile—that China’s power is such that it is bound to dominate all Southeast Asia. But there is no end to that argument until all of the nations of Asia are swallowed up.” |  | ***No:*** “Dove” Senator J. William Fulbright: “The war is described as an exemplary war, a war, that is, that will prove to the communists once and for all that so-called ‘wars of national liberation’ cannot succeed. In fact, we are not proving that. It is said that if we were not fighting in Vietnam we would have to be fighting much closer to home, in Hawaii or even California. I regard this contention as a slander on the U.S. Navy and Air Force.… I do not accept your [Secretary Rusk’s] version as to why there may be an intrusion of communist forces into Thailand.… As long as the war is going on, isn’t this fact an incitement to intrusion by the other side?” |

ISSUE #3: Should the United States fight a war in Vietnam to fulfill the commitments it has made and preserve its national credibility as a great power?

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| ***Yes:*** “Hawk” President Johnson: “Our power, therefore, is a very vital shield. If we are driven from the field in Vietnam, then no nation can ever again have the same confidence in American promise or American protection.… Three Presidents—President Eisenhower, President Kennedy, and your present President—over 11 years have committed themselves and have promised to defend this small and valiant nation.… We just cannot now dishonor our word, or abandon our commitment, or leave those who believed us and trusted us to the terror and repression and murder that would follow.” |  | ***No:*** “Dove” Senator Stuart Symington: “I believe what is going on now in Vietnam has hurt the concept of our capability in the minds of our friends and allies as well as our enemies. It has hurt the national will in this country because of increasing dissension and I am afraid it has made the people who are opposed to us reduce their belief in our capacity.” |

ISSUE #4: Are the goals in Vietnam worth the cost to the United States of fighting the war?

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| ***Yes:*** “Hawk” President Johnson: “Peace will come also because America sent her sons to help secure it. It has not been easy—far from it.… I have lived daily and nightly with the cost of this war. I know the pain it has inflicted.… Throughout this entire long period, I have been sustained by a single principle: that what we are doing now, in Vietnam, is vital not only to the security of Southeast Asia, but it is vital to the security of every American.… I believe the men who endure the dangers of battle…are helping the entire world avoid far greater conflicts, far wider wars, far more destructive than this one.” |  | ***No:*** “Dove” Senator Joseph Clark: “Vietnam is a cancer which is devouring our youth, our morals, our national wealth, and the energies of our leadership. The casualty list from this war only begins on the battlefield. As victims we must count the programs of the Great Society, the balance of payments, a sound budget, a stable dollar, the world’s good will, détente with the Soviet Union, and hopes for a durable world peace. The toll of this war can never be measured in terms of lives lost and dollars spent—they are only the tip of a vast iceberg whose bulk can never be accurately measured.” |

REFERENCES: Marilyn B. Young, *The Vietnam Wars, 1945–1990* (1991); Jeffrey P. Kimball, ed., *To Reason Why: The Debate About the Causes of U.S. Involvement in the Vietnam War* (1990).

# questions for class discussion

. Was the nonviolent civil rights movement of the 1960s a success? Why or why not? Can it be argued that the violent protests of the civil rights movement were more successful than the nonviolent protests?

2. What were the causes of the Vietnam War?

3. Was America justified going into Vietnam? What if the Communist countries invaded a country to “contain the spread of Democracy,” would this be justified? What is the difference between the two situations?

4. Were the cultural upheavals of the 1960s a result of the political crisis, or were developments like the sexual revolution and the student revolts inevitable results of affluence and the baby boom? (See section Thinking Globally on pages 896-897.)

# CONTENDING VOICES: MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. VS. MALCOLM X

# Questions for Class Discussion

1. What methods did Dr. King argue activists must use in their quest for justice? Why would he emphasize these methods over others?

2. How and why did Malcom X disagree with Dr. King’s methods?

# varying viewpoints

# Expanding the View

* Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (1987).

A view of the sixties as fundamentally constructive:

“Say what we will about the Sixties’ failures, limits, disasters, America’s political and cultural space would probably not have opened up as much as it did without the movement’s divine delirium.… This side of an ever-receding millennium, the changes wrought by the Sixties, however beleaguered, averted some of the worst abuses of power, and made life more decent for millions. The movement in its best moments and broadest definition made philosophical breakthroughs which are still working themselves out.”

* William O’Neill, *Coming Apart* (1971).

A view of the sixties as fundamentally destructive:

“Though much in the counter-culture was attractive and valuable, it was dangerous in three ways. First, self-indulgence frequently led to self-destruction. Second, the counter-culture increased social hostility. The generation gap was one example, but the class gap another. Working-class youngsters resented the counter-culture. The counter-culture flourished in cities and on campuses. Elsewhere, in Middle America, it was hated and feared. The result was a national division between the counter-culture and those adults who admired or tolerated it, and the silent majority of workers and Middle Americans who didn’t. The tensions between these groups made solving social and political problems all the more difficult and were, indeed, part of the problem. Finally, the counter-culture was hell on standards.”

# Questions for Class Discussion

1. While admitting mistakes, what does Gitlin argue were the overall positive aspects of the 1960s?

2. While admiring some aspects of the 1960s, what does O’Neill argue were the three major negative developments of this decade?

3. In the text, what are the four issues of the 1960s over which historians have disagreed and what are some of the long-term implications of this important decade?