

The Age of Upheaval, 1960-74

The Fractured Decade

Following the perceived stability of the 1950s—a decade which, in reality, were marked by unmistakable turmoil and conflict from policy divisions, racial clashes, and generational strife unseen in many generations. Much of the division came from the increasingly vocal presence of the baby boomers—exaggerated and sharpened by a foreign war—the assassination of a president, and toward the end of the decade, economic stagnation that had not been seen since the end of World War II. The “fractured decade” of the sixties brought some needed social reforms, but also saddled the nation with long-term problems stemming directly from the very policies adopted during the period.

Except, perhaps, for the decade between 1935 and 1945, the 1960s changed American life and culture more profoundly than any other ten-year period in the twentieth century. Modern society continues to deal with many of the pathologies generated by the era of “free love,” “tune in, turn on, and drop out,” and rebellion.¹ Every aspect of America’s fabric, from national image and reputation to family life, experienced disastrous side effects from the upheaval that began when John F. Kennedy won the presidential election over Richard Nixon.

Time Line

- 1960: John F. Kennedy elected president
- 1961: Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba; Soviet Union erects Berlin Wall
- 1962: Cuban Missile Crisis
- 1963: John F. Kennedy assassinated; Lyndon B. Johnson assumes presidency
- 1964: Johnson introduces Great Society legislation; Civil Rights Act passed; Tonkin Gulf Resolution; Ronald Reagan campaigns for Barry Goldwater’s presidential campaign; Johnson defeats Goldwater
- 1965: Johnson sends combat troops to Vietnam
- 1968: Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy assassinated; Richard Nixon elected president
- 1969: United States lands man on the moon
- 1971: Twenty-sixth Amendment to the Constitution; wage and price controls
- 1972: Nixon visits China; Watergate break-in; Nixon reelected
- 1973: Nixon withdraws last of American troops from Vietnam; *Roe v. Wade* case decided
- 1974: Nixon resigns; Gerald Ford assumes the presidency

Race, Rights, and the War on Poverty
Kennedy had scarcely addressed racial issues in his campaign or his two years in office. By 1963, however, a number of elements had coalesced to push civil rights onto the front pages of every newspaper. In February 1960, four black freshmen from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College sat down at Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro and demanded service.⁵¹ Segregation laws of the day meant that they had staged a supreme act of rebellion, and although the management refused to serve them, their numbers grew as other students and citizens joined them. After five days the owners shut down the store, unsure how to proceed. This began the sit-in movement. Blacks insisted on access to public places and the same market rights that whites enjoyed, and to accomplish this they staged sit-ins to disrupt normal business. If black people could not eat and drink at a lunch counter, no one could.⁵² Students formed a new group, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), to work with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

Almost instantly other sit-ins occurred across the South, with some white supporters joining blacks. They received an intimidating reception. Some were arrested for trespassing, others beaten by mobs, . . . but sometimes they were served. Within a year of the Greensboro sit-in, more than 3,500 protesters had been jailed. Steadily, demonstrations against Jim Crow laws mounted, and other types of protests joined the sit-in. In 1961, to challenge segregated interstate bus terminals, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) instituted “freedom rides” carrying black and white passengers. Birmingham’s city leadership was brought to heel in part by the losses to business caused by segregation.⁵³ A similar development was documented when Averett College, a small Baptist segregated school in Virginia, opened its doors to blacks not under government edict but under financial pressure.⁵⁴ This indicated that, given enough time, the market could produce change. Market processes, however, often work slowly.

Robert Kennedy, the attorney general, instead of acting in support of federal laws, called for a cooling-off period, until an incident at the University of Mississippi again placed a president in the position of having to enforce federal laws against the will of a state.⁵⁵ In 1962, James Meredith, the first black student to enroll at the university, was blocked by the efforts of Governor Ross Barnett, who defied federal marshals who had arrived to enforce desegregation laws. Robert Kennedy then sent troops in to preserve order. Meredith was admitted, and by then JFK had proposed civil rights legislation to Congress, but the issues had been ignored too long, and the laws had come too late to defray black impatience with second-class status.

White racists' reaction to black demands for rights rapidly spun out of control. In June 1962, Medgar Evers, an official of the Mississippi NAACP, was assassinated. Martin Luther King Jr. continued to instruct demonstrators to abstain from violence. King's strategy was to bring the attention of the white nonracist and nonsegregationist majority to bear upon the minority racists and to use righteous indignation as the weapon. This approach required a sharp awareness of the power of the media, which King had. King also appreciated that the power of the pen had been surpassed by the emotional, virtually real-time appeal offered by the television camera. To tap into America's sense of justice and morality, King perceived that black people not only had to force their adversaries into public acts of brutality, but also had to do so under the eyes of the omnipresent television cameras. He possessed this essential insight: that the power of mass demonstrations would not just sway policy makers from the sites of the demonstrations, but also public opinion across the country. This insight, of course, relied on the fact that the majority of the population was moral and just and that change was possible in a democracy.

The clearest test of King's strategy came on August 3, 1963, when King's nonviolent campaign climaxed in a march on Washington, D.C., of two hundred thousand blacks and whites. There, in front of the Lincoln Memorial, King delivered his immortal "I Have a Dream" speech. Telling the massive crowd that "we have come here today to dramatize an appalling condition. In a sense we have come . . . to cash a check," he cited the "magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence," a "promissory note to which every American was to fall heir."⁵⁶ King concluded his speech with words almost as famous as those of the Declaration to which he had referred, saying:

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day, even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice . . . will be transformed into an oasis of freedom. . . . I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists . . . little black boys and little black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today!⁵⁷

The moment became etched in the American memory as the multitude cheered and sang "We Shall Overcome," but unfortunately, the violence had just begun. Several weeks later a bomb detonated in a black Birmingham Baptist church and killed four children. Civil rights demonstrators were greeted by fire hoses, police dogs, and, when attackers thought they were anonymous, deadly force.

During a series of protests in Birmingham, Alabama, during May 1963, the police commissioner, Eugene "Bull" Connor, ordered his men to use dogs, tear gas, electric cattle prods, and clubs on nonviolent demonstrators—all under

the lights of the television cameras. King was jailed by Connor, whereupon he wrote "Letter from Birmingham Jail," a defense of nonviolence rooted in Judeo-Christian and Enlightenment thought and Revolutionary principles, and quoting both Jefferson and Lincoln. "We will reach the goal of America in freedom," King wrote, "because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands."⁵⁸ Yet if King changed America, Connor changed King, who now decided that melting the hearts of Southerners might cost too many lives. After Birmingham, King shifted his strategy to persuading non-Southern Americans, outraged at what they had seen, to force the federal government into action.

The civil rights movement's legitimate goals did not protect it from infiltration by communist elements, which sought to radicalize it. That, in turn, only confirmed in the minds of some, such as FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, that the communists were behind the protests.⁵⁹ They had almost nothing to do with the civil rights leadership, but that did not prevent Hoover from calling King "the most dangerous Negro . . . in this nation."⁶⁰ Although King's martial infidelities convinced Hoover that he needed watching, the murders of black leaders and bombing of black churches apparently did not warrant the resources of Hoover's FBI.⁶¹

There were, in fact, some "dangerous Negroes" in the land, most of them King's black opponents who thought his program too pacific and servile. One faction, the rapidly growing Black Muslim movement of Elijah Muhammad, saw King as a tool of "the white man." Muhammad, departing from traditional Islam, claimed to be the true Messiah. Muhammad hated America and embraced her enemies, and with a new acolyte, Malcolm X, he recruited thousands of members.⁶² Advocating violence and black separatism, Muhammad and Malcolm ridiculed King and the civil rights movement, comparing the march on Washington to getting "coffee that's too black which means it's too strong. . . . You integrate it with cream, you make it weak."⁶³ Hoover's ever-vigilant FBI also kept constant files and wiretaps on Muhammad and Malcolm, but in this case there indeed was a threat to the public order afoot. After Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965, apparently at Muhammad's instructions, the movement (now prominently featuring a newcomer named Louis Farrakhan) turned increasingly violent and anti-Semitic. Between 1960 and 1970, Muhammad's power and health waned, but the rhetoric grew more aggressive, especially against the Jews, whom the Muslims blamed for every malady.

Faced with King's nonviolent movement on the one hand and the more radical racist initiatives on the other, on July 3, 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act.⁶⁴ The gist of the act was unmistakable in that no one could ever again legally deny black citizens access to the institutions of the United States without being liable to criminal and civil prosecution. Segregation in public accommodations, such as restaurants, hotels, theaters, and transportation, was prohibited. Also outlawed was discrimination based on race in employment, and to enforce this section, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) was

formed. Passage of these laws coincided with another King-led movement to register black voters in Southern states, which culminated in a march from Selma to Montgomery to demand the right to vote. At the bridge over the Alabama River, state troopers mounted on horses intercepted the marchers and plunged into them with clubs, as television cameras followed the action. Within a year, Congress had passed the Voting Rights Act, with a higher percentage of Republicans than Democrats voting for the bill. Among those voting against it was prominent Democratic senator and a former member of the Klan, Robert Byrd of West Virginia. These two civil rights laws in fact only ensured enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments of a century earlier, and they worked: within a year black voter registration had leaped by 28 percent, and black majorities in many districts soon began to send representatives to Congress.⁶⁵

Yet less than two weeks after the first of the civil rights acts had passed, the first large-scale race riots occurred, in Harlem. Further rioting followed in Rochester, Paterson, Philadelphia, and Chicago, with one of the worst episodes of violence occurring in August 1965 in Watts, California. There, following a police arrest (area black leaders had long complained that the Los Angeles Police Department was exceptionally racist and violent), the neighborhood broke up into a wave of burning, looting, and destruction, requiring National Guard troops and martial law to end the violence. Black activists, such as Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, blamed whites, and urged blacks to join the new Black Panther organization, whose unofficial motto was "Kill whitey."

White liberals responded to the wave of looting by producing reports. A National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders in 1968 flatly misrepresented the problem, claiming that the riots were directed at "white-owned businesses characterized in the Negro community as unfair."⁶⁶ Then, as in later riots, all businesses were targets, and since the majority were black-owned, the damage was overwhelmingly detrimental to blacks. Legitimate protest, guided and directed, reminded its participants that they were in for the long term and that change would take time, no matter what the cause. The inner-city riots, on the other hand, lacked any organization or direction, appealing to the impulse to get back at someone or get quick restitution through theft. Typically, liberal historians claimed the problem was not enough cash—"programs like Model Cities had never been given enough money to work."⁶⁷ In fact, welfare and other assistance between 1965 and 1970 represented the largest voluntary transfer of wealth in human history, with no appreciable effect—indeed, with horrible consequences. Radical black leaders, such as Malcolm X, predictably blamed "white oppression" and "white middlemen" for the conditions of the local economy, but after the riots the local consumers did not "evince any great interest in promoting black capitalism or in buying black."⁶⁸

Violence placed black leaders like King in a precarious position: having to fend off the radicals while turning up the heat on Washington. (King was booted when he appeared in Watts after the riots.)⁶⁹ Separatists led by Stokely

Carmichael demanded "Black Power" and urged blacks to start their own businesses, schools, and militias. The Black Panthers protested a May 1967 gun-control law understanding that if only the police had guns, blacks would be helpless—and they organized community patrols to protect people from muggers as well as from mistreatment by police. Panther leaders fell far short of King, however, when it came to having either character or courage: Huey Newton went to prison for killing a police officer; Eldridge Cleaver left the country; and evidence surfaced revealing that other Panthers had executed their own members suspected of being informants. King might have been able to step into the chasm separating the radicals and the moderates if he had lived. But an assassin took King out of the picture in Memphis on April 4, 1968, where he had delivered his own eulogy: "I've been on the mountaintop."⁷⁰ A new storm of rioting ensued, including unrest in Washington, D.C. Predictably, the Johnson administration reacted by creating one of the largest bureaucracies since the New Deal and producing the first truly dependent class in American history.

Origins of Welfare Dependency

Lost in the violence, rioting, and assassinations was the simple fact that the Civil Rights Act had, in terms of the law, ended the last legal remnants of slavery and reconstruction. Yet Johnson immediately proposed a "legislative blitzkrieg" that, in the process of the next two decades, would reenslave many poor and minorities into a web of government dependency.⁷¹ Relying on questionable statistics from best sellers, such as Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, which maintained that millions of Americans languished in poverty, Johnson simplistically treated poverty as an enemy to be defeated. In his 1964 State of the Union message, he announced, "This administration today . . . declares unconditional war on poverty," and he declared that only "total victory" would suffice.⁷² The United States, already a "rich society," Johnson observed, had the opportunity to move "upward to the Great Society."⁷³

Johnson constructed a massive framework of new federal programs under the supervision of the Office of Economic Opportunity and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Many of the programs seemed innocuous: the Job Corps presumably taught high school dropouts job skills; VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) was little more than a domestic Peace Corps for impoverished areas; Head Start sought to prepare low-income children for schools by offering meals and other programs.

Without doubt, the most destructive of all the Great Society policies, however, involved a change in a New Deal program called Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The original AFDC had been tightly restricted to widows, with the intention of giving taxpayer subsidies to once-married women who had lost the chief breadwinner in the family. In the 1960s, however, Johnson and Congress quietly changed AFDC qualifications to include any household where there was no male family head present, a shift that now made virtually any divorced or single mother of low income eligible for taxpayer money. The

incentives of the program made it financially more lucrative *not* to be married than to be married. The message from Uncle Sam was, "If you are now married and poor, think about a divorce. If you're not married now, don't even think about getting married."

Seen in the numbers, the changes from the previous decade were shocking. In 1950, 88 percent of white families and 78 percent of black families consisted of a husband and wife in a traditional marriage.⁷⁴ These numbers had not changed since the Great Depression, but something happened after Great Society legislation: white percentages remained unchanged, but black families began to break up, beginning in 1967; then the percentage of intact black families began a steep slide. Within twelve years, the proportion was down to 59 percent, compared to about 85 percent of whites. During this fifteen- to twenty-year period, the percentage of black poor who lived in a single-female household shot up from under 30 percent to nearly 70 percent. White poor in single-female household families increased by about half, but black poor in single-female households rose more than 200 percent, a fact that demonstrated the horrible incentives inserted into the war on poverty. Put another way, the war on poverty managed to destroy black marriages and family formation at a faster rate than the most brutal slaveholder had ever dreamed!⁷⁵

Only a government bureaucrat could fail to see the simple logic of what had occurred. A couple living together, but not married, with the male employed, stood to make slightly more than twice as much than if they were married. Since the courts had ruled that the presence of a man in the house could not be used as a reason to deny a woman "benefits" (a term we shall qualify for now, given the long-term harms done by these programs), then it *seemed* to make economic sense for a man and a woman to refrain from marriage and, instead, live together and combine their incomes. Social changes accounted for most of the fact that divorces rose 30 percent from 1950 to 1970, then went off the charts, nearly doubling again by 1975, but one cannot discount the economic incentives against marriage.⁷⁶

This was nothing less than a prescription for the utter destruction of traditional black families, and had it been proposed by the Imperial Wizard of the KKK eighty years earlier, such a program would have met with a quick and well-deserved fate. But embraced by liberal intellectuals and politicians, the war on poverty and AFDC, especially after the man-in-the-house rule was struck down in 1968, was the policy equivalent of smallpox on inner-city black families in the 1970s. The AFDC caseload rose 125 percent in just five years, from 1965 to 1970, then another 29 percent during the following five years, producing a wave of illegitimate children.

Why were blacks disproportionately affected by the Great Society policies? Minority communities—especially black—were disproportionately concentrated in urban areas, especially inner cities.⁷⁷ Thus, federal welfare workers could much more easily identify needy blacks and enroll them in welfare programs than they could find, or enlist, rural whites in similar circumstances. It wasn't that

there weren't poor whites, but rather that the whites were more diffused and thus difficult to reach. Policies designed for all poor overwhelmingly affected, or more appropriately, infected, the black community.

Having unleashed a whirlwind of marriage destruction and illegitimacy, AFDC produced two other destructive side effects. First, because the single highest correlating factor in wealth accumulation is marriage, AFDC inadvertently attacked the most important institution that could assist people in getting out of poverty. A debate still rages about how this dynamic works, but there appear to be important social, sexual, and psychological reasons why men need to play a key role in the economic life of a family. But there is little reason to debate the data showing that married couples are more than the sum of their parts: they generate more wealth (if not income) than single people living together and obviously more than a single parent trying to raise a family.⁷⁸ Divorced families have less than half the median income of intact families, and even more to the point, have less than half the income of stepfamilies.⁷⁹

A second malignant result of AFDC's no-father policy was that it left inner-city black boys with no male role models.⁸⁰ After a few years at places like Cabrini Green, one of "the projects"—massive public housing facilities for low-income renters that had degenerated into pits of drugs and crime—a young man could literally look in any direction and not see an intact black family.⁸¹ Stepping up as role models, the gang leaders from Portland to Syracuse, from Kansas City to Palmdale, inducted thousands of impressionable young males into drug running, gun battles, and often death.⁸² No amount of jobs programs would fill the void produced by the Great Society's perverted incentives that presumed as unnecessary the role of the father.⁸³

Nor did the war on poverty have even the slightest long-run impact on reducing the number of poor. Indeed, prior to 1965, when Johnson had declared war on want, poverty rates nationally had consistently fallen, and sharply dropped after JFK's tax cut took effect in 1963. After the Great Society programs were fully in place—1968 to 1969—progress against poverty ground to a halt, and the number of poor started to grow again. No matter which standards are used, one thing seems clear: by the mid-1970s, the Great Society antipoverty programs had not had any measurable impact on the percentage of poor in America as compared to the trends before the programs were enacted. It would not be the last "war" the Johnson administration would lose.

"We're Not Going North and Drop Bombs"

Lyndon Johnson inherited not only the slain president's dangerous policy programs but also his poot cabinet choices and advisers. On the one hand, LBJ did not want to see Vietnam detract in any way from his ambitious social programs. On the other hand, he knew he had a conflict to manage (he carefully avoided the reality of the phrase "a war to fight"), and at the urging of his (really Kennedy's) advisers, he tried to deal with Vietnam quietly. This led to the most disastrous of wartime strategies.