

A Brief History of the United States

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Unit Eight

The **G.I. Bill** (1944) gave returning soldiers loans to get homes, businesses and go to college. Many of them moved to the newly built **suburban homes**. The first of these planned communities was called **Levittown**. The soldiers and their wives began the **baby boom**. The war was over, America was prospering, and there was an emphasis on consumer culture. Beneath the surface discontent about **conformity**, economic inequality, political alienation, and **segregation** simmered and would boil over in the next decade.

A new wave of **consumerism** swept society. Just as in the 1920's, advertisers enticed people into buying things that they didn't need. Manufacturers used **planned obsolescence**, purposely made a new style of an item every year, to encourage people to buy the latest version of their product. Automobiles, new appliances, and clothes were purchased on a brand new invention, the **plastic credit card**. People ran themselves into debt, especially to purchase the most coveted item, the **television**. By 1960, 90% of homes had at least one television.

Children were pampered by adoring parents, guided by **Dr. Spock**, and the term **teenager** came to describe adolescents. Teens had money to spend on music (**rock 'n roll**), movies (**drive-ins**) and food (**drive-ins, malt shops, hamburger diners**). Rock music was originally called race music because it was so heavily influenced by African Americans. **McDonald's** got its start in 1955. **Beatniks** protested the **social conformity** and **consumerism** that was rampant in America, much like it was in the 1920's.

African Americans, who had fought in World War II and Korea, were increasingly dissatisfied over the lack of **racial equality**. The court case **Brown v. Board** (1954) ordered **school desegregation** "with all deliberate speed". This decision overturned the **Plessy v. Ferguson** case of 1896 and its separate but equal ruling. In 1957, at Little Rock Arkansas nine African American students integrated the all white Little Rock High. It took the United States **101st Airborne Army** to allow the **Little Rock Nine** to safely attend school. It was the first time since **Reconstruction** (1865-1877) that federal troops occupied a city.

In Montgomery, Alabama in 1955 **Rosa Parks** refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white man, and was arrested. African Americans **boycotted** the bus system, led by **Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**, who would become a visionary leader of the emerging **Civil Rights Movement**. African Americans began the **civil rights movement** in 1954. **MLK, Jr.** advocated **nonviolence**. He headed up the **Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)**. The **Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)**, led by **Stokely Carmichael**, organized **Freedom Summer** to register blacks to vote. **Freedom Riders** were organized to integrate buses. **Malcolm X** espoused a more militant stance, saying that Blacks were justified to counter violence with violence. The **Black Panthers** formed and began to arm themselves to fight the white opposition with bullets. **Malcolm X** was **assassinated** in 1965. That year the black ghetto of Watts, in Los Angeles, violently rioted what began many "long, hot summers" of discontent among inner city African Americans, who at this point were mostly upset about discrimination in housing.

The 1960's was rocked with a brush with nuclear war (**the Cuban Missile Crisis**), the **assassinations** of political and cultural leaders (**JFK, MLK, RFK**), **protests (anti-war, and pro-civil rights)**, riots (see above), and a **war (Vietnam)**. In what many consider to be America's worst year, 1968 had virtually all of the above elements in one calendar year.

In 1960, Republican **Richard Nixon** and Democrat **John Kennedy** met in the first ever **presidential debate**, which was televised. Kennedy was elected and inherited a plan to back an invasion of **communist Cuba**. The **Bay of Pigs** was a complete disaster. Then, in 1961, the Soviets placed **nuclear missiles in Cuba**, 90 miles from Florida. The interstate was closed except for military traffic as the world watched and hoped a nuclear war would not occur. A tense stand off began as the United States demanded the Soviets remove the missiles. The world held its breath for thirteen days as the two countries glared frostily at each other. The Soviets finally backed down and removed the missiles, in exchange for our promise not to invade Cuba. Kennedy also launched the space program and established the **Peace Corps**.

President Kennedy was **assassinated** in November 1963. The new President, **Lyndon Baines Johnson**, embarked on an ambitious program to combat poverty and inequality. The program, called the **Great Society**,

would introduce **Head Start**, **Medicare**, **Medicaid**, a **Civil Rights Act** (first proposed by JFK), and a **Voting Rights Act**. Johnson tried to help the lower tiers of society achieve the success of middle class enjoyed.

The **Warren Court**, under the leadership of **Earl Warren**, became a liberal defender of people's rights. Notable cases include **Brown v. Board of Education**, **Miranda v. Arizona**, **Gideon v. Wainwright**, **Griswold v. Connecticut**, **Tinker v. Des Moines**. (**Roe v. Wade** came after the Warren Court, but was a remnant of its liberalism.)

The next stage in the Cold War unfolded in the **Vietnam War**, with Communist China supporting North Vietnam, and the U.S. supporting South Vietnam. As the war drug on, and more and more people died, and a draft was instituted, college students protested that our involvement was immoral - that we were interfering with the will of the Vietnamese people, and murdering civilians. The **free speech movement** took hold on college campuses such as Berkeley. **Hippies** led the **counterculture**. They used drugs, had premarital sex, and grew their hair long. Some lived on communes.

Our involvement in Vietnam was part of the **containment policy** known as the **Domino Theory** which stated that if Vietnam fell to **communism** its neighbors might succumb to communism as well. Some notable episodes in the Vietnam War: the **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution (1964)**, the **Tet Offensive (1968)**, the **Ho Chi Minh Trail**, and the **Mai Lai Massacre**.

In 1968, **Martin Luther King Jr.** and **Robert Kennedy** were both assassinated, and the **Democratic Convention** was marred by **violent student protests**. With the Democrats badly divided, the Republican Convention in Miami nominated **Richard Nixon**, who managed to win in November. The sixties ended on a higher note as America became the first country to have a man walk on the moon in July 1969, and the hippies held a huge, 3-day outdoor concert at **Woodstock**.

Richard Nixon was elected as president largely due to his promise to achieve **peace with honor** in the **Vietnam War**. Nixon championed the **Silent Majority**. He made strides to reduce the number of combat troops in a process known as **Vietnamization**. But **Nixon** also ordered the **secret bombing** of Laos and Cambodia. When the public learned of this widening of the war, massive protests broke out. On **Kent State** and **Jackson State** Universities, **National Guardsmen** shot and killed protesting students. Nixon was re-elected in 1972. The **Paris Peace Accords** were reached in 1973, but the war did not really end until 1975. The total number of Americans killed was about 58,000. In 1975 the North Vietnamese defeated the South and **Vietnam** became a **united communist nation**. Also, in 1973 the Congress reasserted its authority to make war with the **War Powers Act** (reversing the **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution**). **Nixon** was a skilled foreign policy negotiator. He played tensions between the **Soviets** and **China** perfectly. He visited both countries and softened the cold war in a policy known as **détente**, or a relaxation of tensions.

The **1972 election** would prove to be the end for Nixon. He was always paranoid and power hungry, he kept an **enemies list** with Bill Cosby and hundreds of other people on it. People working for Nixon's reelection campaign were caught breaking into the **Democratic National Headquarters** in the **Watergate** building. The Watergate Scandal would eventually bring Nixon down. Congress and the American People wanted to know "What did the President know and when did he know it?" about the break in. Eventually, it was learned that Nixon ordered a cover up of the Watergate affair. Under the threat of **impeachment**, **Nixon resigned**. The most baffling issue was that Nixon won the election by the widest margin in the 20th Century, it was unnecessary to break into Watergate! Unfortunately, this sad event just deepened the public mistrust of the government. Vice President **Gerald Ford** took over as president, and pardoned Nixon. Probably as a result, he was defeated by **Jimmy Carter** in the **1976 presidential election**.

Highlights (or lowpoints) of Carter's presidency include: returning the **Panama Canal** to the Panamanians, the **Camp David Accords**, the **Iran Hostage Crisis**, the **oil embargo**, and the **Soviet invasion of Afghanistan**, for which Carter pulled the U.S. from the 1980 Olympics in Moscow. Also, Carter tried to tell Americans to be more responsible in what was dubbed his **Malaise Speech**.

The 1970's & especially the 1970's were characterized by a number of social reform movements, including the **Women's Rights** movement and the **Environmental** movement.

The 1980's are all about the **Reagan Presidency**: the **religious right**, **supply-side economics** or **Reaganomics**, the **nuclear arms race**, the **Strategic Defense Initiative (S.D.I.) or Star Wars**, and the **Iran-Contra Affair**. Reagan cut taxes on the wealthy, and dramatically cut spending on social programs. The national debt grew dramatically, but many people loved him anyway. He was the "Teflon President."