

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. DesMoines. (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 reassured 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 1980'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."