

The Vietnam War and Social Conflict, 1964–1971

ACT Quality Core Alignment Correlation: E. America Since World War II (1945- Present): 1.
America at War: h. Describe and evaluate the political and social impact of the Vietnam War.

Learning Targets:

- Identify President Johnson’s goals of his Great Society program.
- Discuss the impetus for the United States to become involved in the war in Vietnam; and identify reasons why it was not victorious in the conflict.
- Describe the commonalities of the 1960s protest movements.
- Explain the conservative revival of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Lesson Outline:

I. Lyndon Johnson and the Apex of Liberalism

Although the American economy thrived during the Eisenhower years, the distribution of the wealth was uneven. The hope was that the economy could support government programs that could help the less fortunate. Also during this era, individual liberties were expanded by the Supreme Court.

A. The New President

Lyndon B. Johnson grew up among rural poverty in the Texas hill country west of Austin. During the New Deal, he was head of the National Youth Administration and a great supporter of Franklin D. Roosevelt. He was Senate majority leader from 1954 to 1960 and vice president from 1961 to 1963. He was the nation’s first Texan president. As president, he retained Kennedy’s cabinet and advisors, and in some ways was even more liberal than Kennedy.

Johnson wanted to perfect American society and called his program the Great Society. In 1964, he campaigned for president against Barry Goldwater, the Republican contender. Unlike Johnson, Goldwater believed in a minimal role for federal government in every aspect but the military. Goldwater advocated using nuclear weapons to stop communism.

B. The Great Society: Fighting Poverty and Discrimination

As part of his Great Society program, Johnson first declared his “War on Poverty.” Johnson and his Congress increased money for food stamps to the needy through the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program and raised Social Security payments. The Head Start program offered pre-school education and meals for children. The Job Corps provided employment, and Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) served as a domestic Peace Corps.

Johnson urged Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, making desegregation legal and outlawing discrimination in employment and public facilities. He also pushed the Voting Rights Act through Congress, outlawing poll taxes and providing federal voting registrars in states that refused to allow African Americans to register to vote.

C. The Great Society: Improving the Quality of Life

Johnson also pushed the Medicare Act through Congress, then traveled to Missouri to sign it into law, as Truman had originally proposed health care for the elderly. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* alerted Americans to the consequences of environmental pollution. In 1963, Congress passed the Clean Air Act and in 1964, the Clean Waters Act, setting federal guidelines for reducing smog and preserving public drinking sources. In 1964, Congress also passed the Wilderness Act, preserving certain lands as wilderness areas.

D. The Liberal Warren Court

The Warren Court continued to make decisions that protected the rights of human beings. In 1963, *Gideon v. Wainwright* established the right of indigent prisoners to legal counsel. In 1964, *Escobedo v. Illinois* granted prisoners the right to legal counsel during interrogation, and in *Miranda v. Arizona* (1966), police were required to inform anyone they were arresting of their rights. In 1962 and 1963 decisions, the Supreme Court limited the practice of prayer in public schools. In 1967, in *Loving v. Virginia*, the court overturned the remaining 16 state laws that outlawed interracial marriages. Finally, in 1967, President Johnson appointed Thurgood Marshall as the nation's first black Supreme Court Justice.

II. Into War in Vietnam

The United States' involvement in the Vietnam conflict was, at first, a slow process; however, once ground troops were sent into the country, the war became more brutal. Atrocities were committed on both sides, and Americans at home became deeply divided. The situation became a quagmire that the United States could not easily exit.

A. The Vietnamese Revolution and the United States

The United States first became involved in Vietnam in the late 1940s. French forces moved into Indochina to retake territory occupied by Japan during World War II but were challenged by nationalist forces led by Ho Chi Minh. These nationalist forces at Dienbienphu surrounded the French army in 1954, and they surrendered. French and Vietnamese diplomats met in Geneva in 1955 and divided Indochina into two countries along the seventeenth parallel, the Democratic Republic of North Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh and the Republic of South Vietnam first under Emperor Bao Dai and then under President Ngo Dien Diem.

The United States supplied money and advisors to the French during Truman's administration. After French withdrawal, U.S. aid to South Vietnam continued, as

President Eisenhower argued that if Vietnam fell to Ho Chi Minh's communist forces, all of Southeast Asia would fall to the communists "like a stack of dominoes." John F. Kennedy did not argue with Eisenhower's "domino theory," but he did attempt to contain the war in Vietnam. He began a "strategic hamlet" program to secure villages friendly to the United States.

B. Johnson's War

In February 1964, Johnson ordered the Pentagon to prepare plans for air strikes against North Vietnam. In May, his advisors drafted a congressional resolution authorizing an escalation of American military action, and in June, the president appointed General Maxwell Taylor as ambassador to Saigon. Then, in early August, North Vietnamese patrol boats allegedly clashed with two American destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin. Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, a substitute for a declaration of war. Johnson compared the resolution to "grandma's nightgown," as it "covered everything."

Between 1965 and 1968, in Operation Rolling Thunder, the United States dropped 800 tons of bombs daily on North Vietnam. The amount of explosive tonnage was three times the amount that had been dropped on all of Europe, Africa, and Asia during World War II. Under Operation Ranch Hand, Americans used defoliants such as Agent Orange to remove ground cover to destroy one-seventh of South Vietnam's arable land. In March 1965, the first marine landed at Danang in South Vietnam. The war had been "Americanized."

C. Americans in Southeast Asia

Although the initial troops were experienced soldiers, the draft was instituted and thereafter the average U.S. soldier was poor and under-educated. The war was a different sort of war than previous wars, being more of a guerrilla-style conflict. U.S. morale was low, compared to that of the North Vietnamese. Even though there were acts of compassion from U.S. soldiers, this image was blurred by atrocities, such as the massacre at My Lai.

D. 1968: The Turning Point

On January 31, 1968, on the first day of Tet, the Vietnamese New Year, the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese attacked more than 100 towns and provincial capitals in South Vietnam. They also attacked Saigon and the American embassy in that city. U.S. forces quickly retaliated and drove the attackers from South Vietnamese cities and towns. General William C. Westmoreland even announced that "the enemy is on the ropes," but Americans were shocked by the success and ferocity of the attacks. Many people questioned President Johnson's assertions that the United States was winning the war.

III. "The Movement"

The war in Vietnam overshadowed the protest movements of the 1960s, radicalizing people who had once been optimistic about societal reform. By the end of the decade many people distrusted traditional authority. Their motto was "Trust no one over thirty."

A. From Civil Rights to Black Power

By 1966, the Civil Rights movement had split into factions. The movement realized some important successes, but a colorblind society was not among them.

Civil rights workers, black and white, poured into the state of Mississippi during the summer of 1964 to register African-American voters. Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) workers called it Freedom Summer. Two white workers, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, along with their black co-worker, James Chaney, were murdered and their bodies were buried in an earthen dam near Philadelphia, Mississippi. This murder and the intimidation and violence experienced by many workers radicalized the movement. Lyndon Johnson alienated many by refusing to recognize the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlanta.

Many young African Americans became followers and admirers of Malcolm X, the eloquent speaker and minister of the Nation of Islam. By 1966, many African Americans began to speak of the need for “Black Power.” Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton co-wrote a book that inspired this demand, *Black Power*. The Black Panther Party, formed in Oakland, California, ran Eldridge Cleaver for president in 1968.

Destructive riots broke out in black ghettos located in the neighborhood of Watts in Los Angeles; Detroit, Michigan; and Newark, New Jersey. These riots were expressions of the frustration and hopelessness felt by many African Americans. In 1967, ninety people died and 4,000 more were injured in riots across the nation.

Most African Americans supported Lyndon Johnson and the Voting Rights Act to pursue their goals of civic equality. In 1966, Carl Stokes of Cleveland became the first black mayor of a major American city. In 1972, Andrew Young of Georgia and Barbara Jordan of Texas became the first southern blacks to be elected to the U.S. House of Representatives since Reconstruction.

B. The New Left and the Struggle Against the War

The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was formed in Michigan in 1962. The Port Huron statement, or charter, for this new organization called for political rejuvenation of the United States. After 1965, the main goal of the SDS was to end the war in Vietnam, and SDS organized the first major antiwar protest on April 15, 1965. SDS became more radicalized in the late 1960s and splintered. One radical faction, the Weathermen, went underground and declared war on the U.S. government.

C. Cultural Rebellion and the Counterculture

Unlike the New Left, who wanted to reform and perhaps destroy parts of American society, the counterculture, or “hippies,” wanted to create an alternative society. Many of these people identified with traditional Native Americans, while

others promoted health foods and cooperative movements. Many lived in communes where they shared their earthly belongings. Others tried drugs to expand their minds and consciousness, experimenting with drugs such as LSD, marijuana, peyote, hashish, etc.

As spirituality was considered by many in the counterculture an important path to consciousness, they sought religious experiences. Membership in the counterculture was loose by definition and many young people in the 1960s dabbled in it to some extent. Perhaps the most memorable expression of the movement in the late 1960s was the Woodstock music festival in upstate New York in August 1969.

D. Women's Liberation

In 1966, Betty Friedan and other liberal feminists founded the National Organization for Women (NOW) to lobby on behalf of women. Members of NOW lobbied for women in areas such as employment, wages, education, etc. But it was the younger feminists of that time that brought the movement into the personal sphere. The new wave of feminism raised debates regarding gender, women's ways of knowing, and women's uniqueness or lack thereof.

E. The Many Fronts of Liberation

Cesar Chavez led the effort to build farm workers' unions in California and the Southwest. He led national boycotts on grapes and iceberg lettuce, and he helped win recognition for the United Farm Workers Union (FWU) and better pay for workers. By 1970, younger Mexicans had appropriated the term Chicano, and many began demanding the inclusion of Latino Studies in the schools.

In 1968, Native-American activists formed the American Indian Movement (AIM). On November 20, 1969, 78 Indians seized the island of Alcatraz and held it for a year and a half. During this period, they took the opportunity to publicize grievances regarding anti-Indian prejudice and discrimination. In 1973, armed members of AIM took control of buildings at Wounded Knee, South Dakota in an unsuccessful effort to bring down the conservative Oglala government on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

Gay men and lesbians also began to construct political coalitions in the late 1960s. Like other oppressed groups, they were demanding tolerance and respect.

IV. The Conservative Response

The majority of Americans had mixed feeling about the protests that rippled across America in the 1960s. Most people wanted an end to the war in Southeast Asia, but what they considered a lack of respect for and appreciation of the nation's virtues and successes angered many conservative Americans. A backlash followed.

A. Backlashes

The rise of nonwhite militancy angered and shocked many white middle-class Americans. Conservatives reacted to anti-war protestors and “hippies” who proposed alternate lifestyles. Their attitude was summed up in the bumper sticker: “America! Love It or Leave It.” Americans especially reacted against the counterculture and anti-war protesters.

B. The Turmoil of 1968 at Home

The turmoil of the 1960s reached its apex in 1968. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on April 4. African Americans demonstrated and rioted across the nation. Forty-six people died in clashes with the police during the riots.

Robert Kennedy entered the presidential race, and unlike Eugene McCarthy, attracted support from a wide variety of Americans. On June 5, he was shot and killed by Sirhan Sirhan because of his pro-Israel policies.

Anti-war activists poured into Chicago in August 1968, some to support Eugene McCarthy and others to disrupt the Democratic National Convention. Mayor Richard Daley mobilized the police, who clubbed and tear-gassed protestors and innocent bystanders alike. Hubert Humphrey emerged from the convention as the Democratic nominee. The Republicans met in Miami, Florida, and chose Richard M. Nixon as their candidate. The governor of Alabama, George Wallace, courted the backlash vote as the candidate for the American Independent Party.

C. The Nixon Administration

Once Richard Nixon was in the White House, he earned the reputation as the most liberal Republican since Theodore Roosevelt. Although he did not take the lead in promoting environmental conservation, he allowed Congress to pass a number of ecologically friendly laws. Nixon, in opposition to anti-war protestors, appealed to the great “silent majority” to support his war efforts. Nixon also opposed court-ordered busing to desegregate American schools.

D. Escalating and De-escalating in Vietnam

Nixon promised to “Vietnamize” the war in South Vietnam by supplying the Army of the Republic of Vietnam with munitions and training. His Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, began negotiations with North Vietnamese officials and secured the release of a number of prisoners of war before the 1972 election. The return of these prisoners aided Nixon’s campaign, as did Nixon’s announcement that the draft would cease in mid-1973.

Discussion Questions:

KAGAN Structures: To get each student involved and answering questions, at each stage in the unit that the discussion are applicable, we will utilize Think-Pair-Share activities for students to record an answer to the best of their ability, pair with a partner, and share their responses. Students will repeat the Think-Pair-Share a total of three times to obtain various interpretations of the answers from their peers before whole class discussion.

1. Discuss the events in the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations that contributed to United States' involvement in Vietnam. How did Nixon propose to extricate U.S. troops from Vietnam, and did he provide "peace with honor" at the end of the conflict?
2. Analyze the successes and failures of Johnson's Great Society programs. Johnson believed that these programs represented a completion of Roosevelt's New Deal policies. How accurate was his assessment?
3. How did the Civil Rights Movement become the Black Power movement? Discuss the personalities and events that transformed the Civil Rights Movement.
4. Compare and contrast the backgrounds and philosophies of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X.
5. Discuss the many fronts of liberation, the counterculture, and the backlash to these various movements.

Significant Themes and Highlights:

1. Lyndon B. Johnson hoped to end poverty and improve the quality of life for all Americans in the 1960s. His Great Society programs ranged from Head Start and Job Corps programs for the underprivileged to Medicare to aid the elderly. Johnson saw his programs as a completion of the New Deal begun by Franklin D. Roosevelt.
2. The United States entered the 1960s in a mood of optimism and exited in a quandary of protests and pessimism. The Civil Rights Movement and anti-war protests became radicalized and resulted in a backlash from right-wing elements in American society.
3. As Vietnam became a quagmire from which the United States could find no easy means of extrication, Americans divided into "hawks," who favored the war, and "doves," who demonstrated against it. Johnson's administration was a casualty of this division, and in March 1968, Johnson announced that he would not seek or accept his party's nomination for re-election in 1968.

Web/Technology Component Assignments:

Students will locate and read three of the 20 primary source documents relating to the Vietnam War online at <http://vietnam.vassar.edu>.

The articles related to the Vietnam War on the Vassar website will be randomly assigned to students (each student receiving three documents to read and summarize) to ensure that all 20 documents are covered.

Students will take notes on the three documents they have been assigned to read and will summarize the information gathered from the documents.

Students will discuss the impact of those documents on the American public and the war in Vietnam as they present their findings. Most documents will be assigned more than once and this will allow for greater discussion topics and a variety of interpretations related to the importance and impact of the document on American involvement in Vietnam.