In 1960 while Kennedy and Nixon contested the presidency, a handful of white students organized Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). SDS represented a new birth of activism on the part of white young people just as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had given voice to the activism of African-American students (see Chapter 25). The birth of groups like SDS and SNCC guaranteed that the 1960s would not be as quiet as the 1950s. As Bob Dylan, the best known folk singer of the early 1960s sang, "The times they are a changing."

Student protesters and folk singers were far from the only signs that something new was brewing in American culture after 1960. New literature signaled the change that was coming. Between 1961 and 1963, three women authors published books challenging fundamental issues: Jane Jacobs, the way cities were developing; Rachel Carson, the pollution of the environment; and Betty Friedan, the "quiet desperation" of many women's lives. They were not alone; authors increasingly challenged various aspects of American life.

The new president also represented a generational change in American politics. This chapter traces the many changes that some Americans embraced, others rejected, but few ignored as the United States experienced the decade known to many simply as "the sixties."
**NEW VOICES, NEW AUTHORITIES**

**26.1** Explain the growing social protest in books, films, and student movements starting in the early 1960s.

Though it was formative for many, the Civil Rights Movement was only one of many challenges to American culture in the 1960s. Writers and artists had often been uncomfortable with the conformity of the 1950s, and their uneasiness took on new forms as the new decade began. Small political movements burst onto a larger stage. The result was a number of books, films, and songs that reflected and helped shape a rapidly changing culture while wide-ranging protest movements, often led by students, changed not only college campuses but also the country.

**Books, Films, Music**

Jane Jacobs was a writer and activist in New York's Greenwich Village. When she wrote *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* in 1961, in the opening line of that book, Jacobs said, "This book is an attack on current city planning and rebuilding." Indeed, it was an amazingly successful attack. Reflecting on the book's impact, one urban planner wrote, "When an entire field is headed in the wrong direction...then it probably took someone from outside to point out the obvious." After Jacobs, city planners in New York and most cities turned away from massive highway development, sprawling suburbs, and isolated urban high-rise buildings to focus on smaller, more neighborhood-friendly options. Projects to bulldoze slums and build highways were replaced in the 1960s by the re-development of existing urban neighborhoods. Jacobs did not bring about this change single-handedly, but her book was a guidebook to a new generation of urban planners.

Two books published in 1962 played a similar role in other movements. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* is often called the bible of the conservation movement. Other people dating back to Theodore Roosevelt talked about conserving rather than taming nature, but Carson gave the preservation movement a new voice in the 1960s. While most earlier conservation efforts focused on protecting land from development, Carson described in graphic detail what pesticides were doing to birds and animals.

Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, also published in 1962, is sometimes credited with launching the Kennedy-Johnson era War on Poverty. Harrington's was far from the only voice urging a new look at the urban and rural poverty that had gone unnoticed in the affluent 1950s, but Harrington's book sold over a million copies, and the critic Dwight McDonald convinced President Kennedy to read it. In his own way, Harrington, like Carson and Jacobs, put a human face on an otherwise easily ignored domestic issue. Describing the way poverty was hidden in modern America cities, Harrington wrote, "The poor still inhabit the miserable housing in the central area...The failures, the unskilled, the disabled, the aged, and the minorities are right there, across the tracks, where they have always been. But hardly anyone else is...They have no face; they have no voice." The War on Poverty began to change that situation in 1964 and 1965.

Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, played an equally central role in the development of the new women's movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s (see Chapter 27). *The Feminine Mystique* named what Friedan called the "problem that has no name": the "comfortable concentration camp" where white middle-class suburban women lived. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a generation of women found multiple ways to break out of this and other "concentration camps."

Each of these books sold thousands, sometimes hundreds of thousands of copies. They were read by college students and people of every age bracket, and were discussed on the radio and television, in newspaper editorials, in sermons in religious communities, and around family dinner tables, bringing their ideas to many who never read them. Each book reflected changes that were already underway and, at the same time, each speeded change.
Films and music had possibly even more influence on Americans. In the 1960s, film and music took on a new and harder edge. Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* portrayed the leaders of the United States and the Soviet Union as crazed militarists willing to destroy the world. Later in the decade, *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *The Wild Bunch*, and *Easy Rider* (both 1969) showed a level of violence not previously seen in film, reminding audiences that this world was still a very violent one.

Many who had enjoyed the provocative rock ‘n’ roll sexuality of Elvis in the 1950s listened to the provocative protest folk songs of Bob Dylan and Joan Baez in the early 1960s and later to the drug-influenced acid rock of Jimi Hendrix, Pink Floyd, and the Grateful Dead in the later 1960s. Change, protest, and disengagement were increasingly reflected in film and song.

Protest songs and angry movies, however, did not completely dominate the media in the 1960s. The sentimental celebration of love and marriage, *The Sound of Music* (1965), earned $100 million, the highest gross income of any movie up to that time. *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* continued to be one of the most popular TV series up to 1966. In addition, the traditional music on the *Lawrence Welk Show* and the symphonic pop music of Henry Mancini competed with folk and rock throughout the decade. The sixties were far from a unified decade, in culture or politics, but the very depth of the disunity was one of the hallmarks of the times.

**The Student Movement of the 1960s**

Universities had long been the location for challenges to the norms of the larger society. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, there were many student demonstrations. But the sheer numbers of students and the new attitudes of the baby boom generation who came to college in the 1960s transformed college life. In 1947, as a result of the GI Bill, college enrollments reached an historic high, and they continued to grow in each following decade.

Budgets for higher education grew even faster than enrollments. As sociologist and 1960s student activist Todd Gitlin noted, “By 1960 the United States was the first society in the history of the world with more college students than farmers.” Ten years later, the nation had three times as many students as farmers. Although most of the students of the late 1940s and 1950s had been relatively quiet, the students of the 1960s were not.

Students who had founded the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in 1960 met at Port Huron, Michigan, in 1962 to draft a statement of their beliefs. The 1962 Port Huron statement, of which Tom Hayden, then a graduate student, was the prime author, began, “We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit.” Recognizing their baby boom origins, the statement continued, “Many of us began maturing in complacency,” but then, “[a]s we grew; however, our comfort was penetrated by events too troubling to dismiss….the Southern struggle against racial bigotry [and] the enclosing fact of the Cold War.” The Port Huron statement noted, “a yearning to believe there is an alternative to the present, that something can be done to change circumstances in the school, the work places, the bureaucracies, the
THINKING HISTORICALLY
Rachel Carson's Silent Spring, 1962

Rachel Carson grew up in an isolated rural community 15 miles northeast of Pittsburgh on the Allegheny River. As an adult, she worked for the federal Fish and Wildlife Service while also writing independently, publishing The Sea Around Us, a description of life in the ocean in 1951. The book was a great success, and Carson decided to then take on a study of the impact of DDT and other chemicals on the environment. The result was Carson's most famous book, Silent Spring, which not only caught public imagination but also changed the way many Americans thought about the environment. Silent Spring was first published as a series of articles in The New Yorker in 1962, then published as a book that same year, and in 1963, aired as part of a CBS television series in 1963. Carson warned:

Since the mid-1940s over 200 basic chemicals have been created for use in killing insects, weeds, rodents, and other organisms described in the modern vernacular as "pests"; and they are sold under several thousand different brand names.

These sprays, dusts, and aerosols are now applied almost universally to farms, gardens, forests, and homes—nonselective chemicals that have the power to kill every insect, the "good" and the "bad," to still the song of birds and the leaping of fish in the streams, to coat the leaves with deadly film, and to linger on in the soil—all this though the intended target may be only a few weeds or insects. Can anyone believe it is possible to lay down such a barrage of poisons on the surface of the earth without making it unfit for all life? They should not be called "insecticides," but "biocides."

Along with praise for the book, Carson was criticized, most of all by the chemical industry whose products her research and writings indicted. Spokespersons for some of the major chemical companies and even some of Carson's former colleagues in the Department of Agriculture attacked the book as an effort to turn the clock back to a time when insect-born diseases, most of all malaria, killed thousands and wiped out crops causing widespread starvation.

President Kennedy, however, was impressed enough with the book to order his Science Advisory Committee to review it. When the committee confirmed her findings, Kennedy and subsequent administrations took further action, banning the domestic use of DDT. Later in 1970, President Nixon signed the legislation creating the Environmental Protection Agency to consolidate the government's efforts to protect the environment that Carson loved.


Thinking Critically
1. Historical Interpretation
   How might Carson have responded to critics in the chemical industry? How might the public have evaluated their criticism? How might people's jobs or political views impact their response?
2. Contextualization
   Thinking about earlier conservation efforts, like those of Teddy Roosevelt, how was Carson different?

government... It is to this latter yearning, at once the spark and engine of change, that we direct our present appeal." The spark and the "yearning to believe there is an alternative to the present," would characterize the decade of the 1960s for many people, especially the young.

Not long after SDS was launched, another student movement emerged at the University of California at Berkeley. In the fall of 1964, the Berkeley administration issued a directive that student organizations that were raising funds for off-campus causes such as civil rights using tables set up on the university grounds had to move those efforts off campus. Opposition to the directive quickly united students. When petitions and meetings with the university administration did not resolve the issue, a group of students, some of whom had spent the previous summer in the South as part of Mississippi Freedom Summer, called for civil disobedience in Berkeley.

Students brought their tables back to campus and awaited to see what would happen. Before long, campus police arrived and arrested Jack Weinberg who had been
sitting at one of the tables, placing him in a police car. Quickly, some 3,000 students surrounded the car, and for the next 32 hours, while Weinberg sat in the car, speaker after speaker used the top of the car as a platform. The long spontaneous rally launched the free speech movement at Berkeley.

In December of that year, at a much larger student rally on the Berkeley campus, Mario Savio, a junior philosophy major who emerged as the prime voice of the student protest during the siege of the police car, told his fellow students, "There's a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious...you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus and you've got to make it stop." Hundreds marched into the administration building to stop the university's wheels. They sat in for two days until arrested. Berkeley remained a center of student protest.

**Quick Review** How did student protest, changes in popular music, and the inauguration of John F. Kennedy symbolize the changes coming to the United States in the early 1960s?

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**CAMELOT, THE WHITE HOUSE, AND DALLAS—THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION**

The student protests were but one aspect of the changes taking place in the early 1960s. The January 1961 inauguration of John F. Kennedy (referred to often as JFK) brought the youngest president elected in the nation's history to replace the oldest. A new generation was taking charge of the country from college campuses to the White House. Kennedy partisans remembered his years in office as "one brief shining moment"—to cite the lines of the then-popular *Camelot*, a Broadway play about medieval glory to which the Kennedy's glamour was often compared. Certainly John Kennedy, his young and attractive wife Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, and their extended family made for a dramatic comparison with the sometimes dowdy Eisenhowers. They were able to project an image of glamour, youth, vigor (the president's favorite word, pronouncing it with his Boston accent as "vigah"), and wit. The press loved to spar with Kennedy and he with them. During the Kennedy years, the White House was the scene of gala events, concerts, and dinner parties not seen in Washington for some time. The hopes and expectations for change that arrived with Kennedy were unmistakable.

**The New Frontier**

Civil rights advocates also had high hopes for the Kennedy administration, believing that the new president, who had gone out of his way as a candidate to support Martin Luther King, Jr., would do more to support the cause of civil rights than Eisenhower. The Kennedy administration created a Committee on Equal Employment Opportunities headed by Vice President Johnson to look into discrimination in hiring. They hired blacks in the federal government, including some in high positions in the civil and foreign service. JFK nominated African-Americans, including Thurgood Marshall, to federal judgeships. During the presidential campaign in 1960, Kennedy promised to introduce a new federal civil rights bill if elected. But throughout 1961 and 1962, no such bill emerged from the White House. He also had promised to end racial discrimination in federal housing with the "stroke of a pen," but when no order emerged, civil rights organizers started sending thousands of pens to him.

Kennedy was slow to move on civil rights for many reasons. He could count votes in the Congress, and southern Senators with high seniority made congressional action hard to imagine. The Kennedys were also good at gauging voter interest, and in 1961
and 1962, not that many white voters seemed interested in civil rights issues. At the same time, J. Edgar Hoover hated Martin Luther King, Jr., and was convinced that he was a sexual degenerate and a Communist. He had tapes to prove extramarital activity on King’s part, if nothing to show that he was a Communist. Hoover also had tapes to prove President Kennedy’s considerable extramarital activities, which may well have made both Kennedy brothers reluctant to challenge Hoover, who they allowed to tap King’s telephones. Whatever the reasons, the vaunted Kennedy vigor was not brought to civil rights.

In other areas, Kennedy’s New Frontier, as he called his domestic policy, was more successful. Working closely with House Speaker Sam Rayburn, the administration was able to win an increase in the federally mandated minimum wage. At their urging, Congress also provided funds for job training and tougher regulations for testing new drugs before they went on the market. JFK was the first president since Herbert Hoover to include no women in the cabinet, but he appointed Eleanor Roosevelt to head the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women that recommended federal laws against sex discrimination. Kennedy issued executive orders ending sex discrimination in the federal civil service and signed an 1963 Equal Pay Act that mandated equal pay for equal work. In part because of his mentally ill sister, Kennedy cared deeply about mental health and, at his urging, Congress passed the Mental Retardation Facilities and Community Mental Health Act in 1963 that funded support for mental health programs.

In May 1961, Kennedy, who had been critical of the lack of interest in space exploration by the Eisenhower administration, advocated a significant increase in funding for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and made a promise that within 10 years the United States would safely land a man on the moon. Although Kennedy did not live to see the promise fulfilled, in 1969, the nation celebrated that accomplishment.

The chair of his Council of Economic Advisers, Walter Heller, convinced Kennedy that a tax cut would stimulate the economy leading to greater prosperity for Americans and improved standing of the Kennedy administration with voters. Kennedy fought
hard for the tax cut and won. Nevertheless, the domestic record was disappointing to the administration, which would have liked to see faster congressional action on many of its proposals. The New York Times for November 12, 1963, said, “Rarely has there been such a pervasive attitude of discouragement around Capitol Hill... This has been one of the least productive sessions of Congress within the memory of most of its members.”

Religion, Education, and the Courts

Just as Kennedy had his reasons for not wanting to deal with civil rights, he also had very strong reasons for not wanting to deal with the issue of religion. As the first Catholic to be elected president, he wanted to steer clear of anything that might imply his religion was influencing his work. But as with civil rights, issues of religion were bubbling.

On June 25, 1962, the U.S. Supreme Court announced its decision in the case of Engel v. Vitale. By a 6-1 vote, the Court declared that schools in New York State could not open the school day with prayer. The specific issue in Engel v. Vitale was of relatively recent origin. As the Cold War led to a fear of “godless communism,” the New York State Board of Regents, which had responsibility for all public schools in the state of New York, recommended—but did not require—opening the school day with prayer. Then in 1958, the board composed a short official prayer, “Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers and our Country.” It was as inoffensive as a prayer could be, and any students who objected could be excused when it was recited. Nevertheless, the prayer caused problems. Nonbelievers did not want to say any prayer. Devout believers found such a bland prayer close to blasphemy. When Joseph and Daniel Roth asked to be excused from their Long Island classroom during the prayer because their father asked them to, they were taunted. Their father, Lawrence Roth, challenged the prayer in court. As the case was combined with others and moved through the courts, it generated public attention and anger. In the end, Justice Hugo Black spoke for the Supreme Court majority in saying, “We think that the constitutional prohibition against laws respecting an establishment of religion must at least mean that in this country it is no part of the business of government to compose official prayers.”

A year later, the court went further. Edward and Sidney Schempp challenged the policy of the Abington Township School Board (Pennsylvania), which opened the school day with a Bible reading and the Lord’s Prayer. In a 1963 decision, Abington School Board v. Schempp, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that, no matter who composed the prayers, the school board’s practices or any devotional reading of scriptures or recitation of prayers was unconstitutional. The court went out of its way to insist that the academic study of religion, including the study of the Bible “for its literary and historic qualities,” was not only constitutional but also to be encouraged. However, it was not the business of government, the Court said, to lead devotional activities.

The Supreme Court’s decisions provoked a fire storm. Many Americans, Protestants and Catholics, claimed that the court was “legislat[ing] God out of the public schools” and that historic practices that “had never bothered anyone” were being undermined by an unusually activist Warren court. New York Congressman Frank J. Becker proposed an amendment to the Constitution to allow voluntary prayer and Bible reading. The evangelist Billy Graham said, “The trend of taking God and moral teaching from the schools is a diabolical scheme.” Alabama Governor George Wallace said, “I don’t care what they say in Washington, we are going to keep right on praying and reading the Bible in the public schools of Alabama.” While Catholics had once opposed devotional activities in public schools, sure that they would be Protestant, now New York Archbishop Francis Cardinal Spellman said he was “shocked and frightened” by the court’s decisions. For large numbers of Americans, the decisions were the beginnings of a cultural war that would last for decades.
Kennedy’s Foreign Policy—From the Bay of Pigs to the Cuban Missile Crisis

In a private conversation with his defeated rival, Richard Nixon, President Kennedy asked Nixon, “Foreign affairs is the only important issue for a president to handle, isn’t it?” Kennedy said he really didn’t care about the minimum wage “compared to something like Cuba.” While Americans receiving minimum wage might care a great deal about it, Kennedy’s focus was, indeed, Cuba, Germany, Vietnam, China, and perhaps most of all the Soviet Union. In his inaugural address, Kennedy had promised to “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty.” He came to office a devout Cold Warrior and remained one.

The first test of Kennedy’s Cold War resolve came early. The corrupt government of Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista had been overthrown at the beginning of 1959 in the middle of Eisenhower’s second term. The new revolutionary government led by Fidel Castro was very popular in the United States during its first few months in office. Castro was welcomed in the United States and even appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show. Organized crime, which had enjoyed a haven for gambling and prostitution in Cuba under Batista, was driven out by Castro to the applause of most Americans. However the Cuban-American relationship quickly soured. The new revolutionary government executed a number of Batista supporters—too many, most Americans thought. As part of its land reform efforts, the Castro government seized the island’s large commercial enterprises, including vast holdings of American sugar and oil companies. Unhappy business interests—legitimate and illegitimate—began a public relations campaign against the new Cuban government. Castro’s communist leanings also became clearer as Cuba developed close ties with the Soviet Union. Before long, Soviet military advisers arrived in Cuba. By the time Kennedy came to office in January 1961, many considered Cuba to be a virtual satellite of the Soviet Union. The Eisenhower administration had developed plans to train a volunteer force to invade the island. Influential people, including JFK’s father, former ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy, urged Kennedy to take action. While some advisers had reservations, Allen Dulles, the head of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), was a strong advocate, and Secretary of Defense McNamara and the Joint Chiefs of Staff approved the invasion.

On April 15, 1961, less than 3 months after JFK took office, American-based planes made an initial bombing run against the island. Two days later, a brigade of 1,400 U.S. volunteer troops landed at the Bay of Pigs on Cuba’s south coast. The plan was for the force to connect with other Cuban anti-Castro forces that the CIA was convinced were ready to rise up against the regime. In fact, no internal revolt sprang up. Cuban defenses were strong. When the attackers called for further air support from the United States, Kennedy refused. He had become convinced that the attack was doomed. Within hours, 114 of the invaders were killed and 1,189 taken prisoner. The Bay of Pigs fiasco was a huge embarrassment for Kennedy. He took personal responsibility for the failure. He also fired Allen Dulles. For the rest of his term, Kennedy would be more cautious and less willing to trust advisers in the CIA.

Kennedy’s first summit with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev took place in June 1961 in Vienna, just 2 months after the Bay of Pigs crisis. The meeting did not go well. Khrushchev gloated over the Soviet Union’s success in getting the first man into space when Yuri Gagarin orbited the earth in April. He also made threatening comments about Berlin. Khrushchev seemed to believe that the new president was weak and could be brow-beaten. In fact, his actions only strengthened Kennedy’s inclination to show he could be tough. Two months later, Khrushchev ordered the construction of what came to be known as the Berlin Wall to separate the Soviet zone of the city from the western zone and the construction of similar barriers separating all of East Germany from West Germany. German Communists complained that their socialist system provided free education for people who then took their skills west to make more money. After August 1961, no such easy movement, nor were family visits or other travel possible.

Bay of Pigs
A 1961 invasion of Cuba by anti-Castro rebels backed by the Kennedy administration that was quickly defeated, much to Kennedy’s embarrassment.

Berlin Wall
A substantive partition built by East Germany on instructions from the Soviet Union that cut off all travel between East and West Berlin from 1961 to 1989.
An American surveillance plane took pictures like this one of missile facilities in Cuba that deeply worried the Kennedy administration.

By fall, Berlin had become very tense. Some Kennedy advisers suggested that the United States should use force to stop construction of the Berlin Wall. Others wondered whether access would be blocked as it was at the time of the Berlin Airlift. By the end of October, U.S. and Russian tanks faced off in Berlin. Some wondered whether World War III was about to begin. Eventually, the United States and the Soviet Union compromised. Kennedy acknowledged that he would "rather have a wall than a war," and that the Soviets had a right to build the Berlin Wall. Khrushchev did not try to close off American or western access to Berlin as Stalin had done. While the city remained a flash point in the Cold War, and the Berlin Wall stayed in place until November 1989, the Berlin crisis of 1961 passed.

The third major foreign policy crisis of the Kennedy administration—and the most dangerous—took place in October 1962. Again, the focus was Cuba. After the U.S. failure in the Bay of Pigs invasion, Cuban-Russian ties grew stronger and the Soviets sent more military personnel to Cuba. In the summer of 1962, the Soviets began building missile bases in Cuba that could house medium-range missiles pointed at the United States. As U.S. reconnaissance flights showed proof of the missiles in Cuba, it became clear that a major crisis—the Cuban missile crisis—was brewing.

In this crisis atmosphere, Kennedy convened an "Executive Committee" of the National Security Council. For 13 tense days in October 1962, these advisers debated the next U.S. step. Moderates led by UN Ambassador Adlai Stevenson urged restraint. Why panic about a new missile site, they asked, when the United States had missiles in Turkey and there were enough submarine-based missiles to destroy the planet?
Hard-liners, including former Secretary of State Dean Acheson and National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, urged an immediate U.S. attack on the missile site. A third group, led by Robert Kennedy, opposed a surprise strike, which, RFK said, would make his brother, “the Tojo [the Japanese premier who ordered the attack on Pearl Harbor] of the 1960s.” The president agreed with his brother’s position and overruled the hard-liners, but he was also determined to be tough.

On October 22, President Kennedy informed Khrushchev in both a diplomatic communication and a prime-time television speech that the United States would enforce a complete “quarantine” against future military shipments to Cuba and that the United States would meet any Soviet retaliation anywhere in the world with a “full retaliatory response.” The stakes could not be higher. If a Soviet ship ran the blockade, it would be fired on by the United States. If the Soviets made a military move, the United States was prepared to fire missiles. Many worried that the world was on the brink of nuclear war. The next morning, as the first Soviet ships approached, people held their breaths. Then the Soviet freighters turned around. Secretary of State Dean Rusk said, “We’re eyeball to eyeball, and the other fellow just blinked.”

Behind the scenes, Kennedy and Khrushchev had come to an agreement. The Soviets agreed to remove the missiles in return for an end to the quarantine of the island and a promise that the United States would not invade. The United States also agreed to remove its missiles from Turkey but did not announce its decision. An unthinkable war had been avoided. Both leaders quickly took steps to avoid a repeat of the crisis and new communication systems—especially a “hot line” from the Pentagon and White House to the Kremlin—were set up so there would be no delay in communication in any future crisis.

Some military leaders and Cuban exiles were furious at Kennedy. U.S. Air Force General Curtis LeMay (who had commanded the bombing of Tokyo in 1945) stunned the president when he told him, “It’s the greatest defeat in our history, Mr. President…. We should invade today.” Others wondered whether Kennedy allowed his machismo to get the best of him when the missiles in Cuba were no more of a threat than others already in place and hardly worth a world war.

While the crises in Cuba, Berlin, and then Cuba again were the most significant of Kennedy’s foreign policy, the president also faced others. In spite of the 1960 campaign rhetoric in which Kennedy had accused Eisenhower of allowing a “missile gap” to develop between the United States and the Soviet Union, once in office, Kennedy acknowledged that no such gap existed. Nevertheless, the Kennedy administration increased military spending from $47.4 billion when it took office to $53.6 billion in its last budget. The United States expanded the number of Polaris submarines armed with missiles as well as the number of land-based missiles in the United States. Each side had enough missiles to destroy the world multiple times.

The administration created a new “flexible response” policy as an alternative to Eisenhower’s “mutually assured destruction.” They gave high priority to creating “counterinsurgency” forces, named the Green Berets, that could engage in small-scale military operations in hot spots around the world. In planning for Cuba, where the administration had a special interest, they developed Operation Mongoose, a secret CIA program to destabilize the Castro regime by contaminating Cuban sugar, causing explosions in Cuban factories, and developing at least 33 plans to assassinate Castro, all of which failed.

In addition to Kennedy’s foreign policy efforts to contain communism, the administration launched a new effort at peace in Laos, support for the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID), and efforts at economic reform in Latin America and elsewhere. Kennedy also launched the Peace Corps, through an Executive Order, to recruit young idealistic Americans to spend 2 years abroad as volunteers working on education and development projects. In the spring of his first year in office, the president, joined by First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy, dazzled Europe.
By the end of his first term, however, Kennedy’s foreign policy legacy was mixed. Chester Bowles, who served for a time as Undersecretary of State in the Kennedy administration, said that the Kennedy inner circle were “full of belligerence” and “sort of looking for a chance to prove their muscle.” A nuclear-armed world was a dangerous place to do such a thing. Nevertheless, in November 1963, in spite of ongoing tensions in Southeast Asia, Berlin, and Cuba, JFK was still immensely popular in many parts of the world, and the world was at peace. The president turned his attention to his 1964 reelection campaign.

Dallas, Conspiracies, and Legacies

The Kennedy team wanted to ensure that Texas, home of the vice president, stayed Democratic in 1964. But the Democratic Party in Texas was deeply divided. There was also deep distrust of Kennedy in Texas by 1963, indeed, even a deep visceral hatred among some Texans. In November 1963, Kennedy dreaded the trip he needed to make to build his standing in the Lone Star State.

After the president and Jackie Kennedy arrived in Dallas on November 22, 1963, they rode into the city center in a caravan, the president and First Lady along with Texas Governor John Connally and his wife in the first car, Vice President Johnson in the next one. A little after noon, as they passed the Texas School Book Depository, several shots rang out. One wounded Connally. Two hit the president. A back brace he wore for constant back pain held him erect and the second shot hit his head. By the time the president’s car reached the nearest emergency room, the president was dead. A Catholic priest offered the last rites.

Vice President Lyndon Johnson had been right behind Kennedy’s car and quickly understood what had happened. Neither Johnson nor anyone else knew how many people were involved in the assassination or how widespread the danger might be, so Johnson insisted that the presidential party wait until Kennedy’s coffin was brought to Air Force One, still parked at the airport where it had arrived that morning. In the afternoon Johnson, flanked by his wife Lady Bird and by Jacqueline Kennedy, took the presidential oath of office. Then they flew to Washington. Kennedy’s death provoked an outpouring of national grief. Suddenly, the youthful vigor that the president had projected, and the hopes that many Americans had projected onto him, seemed to dim.

Lee Harvey Oswald was arrested for the murder. His fingerprints were on the gun and he had easy access to the window where the shots were fired. Two days later, another troubled man, Jack Ruby, shot Oswald in the Dallas police station. Many suspected a widespread conspiracy. President Johnson asked Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren to lead a high-level bipartisan commission to find out the truth. The commission’s report—known as the Warren Report—concluded that Oswald acted alone. Not everyone was convinced; no one could confirm for sure the whole story behind Kennedy’s death. Whatever the truth, a very different kind of person became president on November 22, one who would lead the administration and the country with a dramatically different style and set of priorities.
THE COMING OF LYNDON B. JOHNSON

26.3 Analyze the successes and failures of the Johnson administration in terms of the two issues that dominated his years in office—the launching of the Great Society programs and the war in Vietnam.

John F. Kennedy had been born to wealth and had attended Harvard College. As a child he had met Franklin D. Roosevelt because his father was Roosevelt's ambassador to Great Britain. He was elected to Congress as a war hero after his small boat, PT-109 had been sunk in the Pacific during World War II, and he had served 8 years in the U.S. Senate before becoming president. Kennedy was handsome and charismatic, important factors in his election and continuing popularity.

Lyndon Johnson was born to poverty in the Texas hill country northwest of San Antonio and grew up in a small house in Johnson City when there were no sidewalks or electricity. His tough and slightly wild father served in the Texas legislature, trying hard to make ends meet, and his strong-willed mother yearned for a better life. LBJ, as he was often called, attended Southwest Texas State Teachers College. He arrived in Washington as a congressional secretary a year before Roosevelt was elected and managed to meet FDR, whom he idolized and who in 1935 appointed the then 26-year-old LBJ as the director of the National Youth Administration for the state of Texas. Johnson worked harder than any other NYA state director, got important services for Texas, and never forgot the value of government when he saw the New Deal bring jobs, electricity, and hope to people living isolated lives in rural poverty.

Johnson had a long and distinguished career in Congress before becoming vice president. He was first elected to the House of Representatives in 1937. He campaigned tirelessly and worked equally tirelessly once in office, building strong ties and coalitions. LBJ and his wife Lady Bird became a family for the sometimes lonely bachelor, Sam Rayburn, another Texan, who served as Speaker of the House for all but 4 years between 1940 and 1961. LBJ lost a primary race for a Senate seat in 1941 but won the seat in 1948. Once in the Senate, Johnson built connections to the powerful committee chairs. In 1953, at the age of 45, he was elected Democratic leader in the Senate. In 1955, he suffered a severe heart attack, recovered quickly and kept working, kept building coalitions, becoming known for the "Johnson Treatment" when he would grab a colleague by the coat lapels and hold his face an inch away while using anger, humor, and statistics to win a wavering vote. He was highly respected for his ability to get things done in the Senate, even if he was often feared and seldom liked.

Few said he was handsome or charismatic. Everyone said he was effective.

Johnson hated his tenure as vice president. Many of Kennedy's inner circle, especially Attorney General Robert Kennedy made sure he was kept out of the most significant decisions. Once he became president, LBJ desperately wanted to be loved as Kennedy had been, but most of all was determined to get things done in a way that Kennedy had not been able to do. On the domestic front, he succeeded masterfully at moving his agenda along before slowly sinking into the morass of Vietnam.

The War on Poverty and the Great Society

In his first speech as president, 5 days after Kennedy was shot, LBJ mourned with the nation, but he also demonstrated a confident leadership that the country was looking for. Johnson told the Congress that he was determined to continue the "Kennedy dream" of education, jobs, care for the elderly, and "equal rights for all Americans." One could question whether, given his focus on foreign policy, those goals had actually been Kennedy's dream, but they would certainly be Johnson's. Thus, the first president from a former Confederate state insisted, "No memorial or oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights bill for which he fought so long." Congress was being put on notice that the former powerful Democratic majority leader of the Senate, now president, was determined to see his legislation passed.
Six months after he had taken the oath of office in Dallas, Lyndon Johnson gave the commencement address at the University of Michigan. He used the speech to outline a new program—a Johnson program to be known as the Great Society—to improve the quality of life for all Americans.

I have come today from the turmoil of your Capital to the tranquility of your campus to speak about the future of your country....

Your imagination, your initiative, and your indignation will determine whether we build a society where progress is the servant of our needs, or a society where old values and new visions are buried under unbridled growth. For in your time we have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society.

The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time. But that is just the beginning.

The Great Society is a place where every child can find knowledge to enrich his mind and to enlarge his talents....

So I want to talk to you today about three places where we begin to build the Great Society—in our cities, in our countryside, and in our classrooms....

Our society will never be great until our cities are great. Today the frontier of imagination and innovation is inside those cities and not beyond their borders.

New experiments are already going on. It will be the task of your generation to make the American city a place where future generations can come, not only to live but to live the good life....

A second place where we begin to build the Great Society is in our countryside. We have always prided ourselves on being not only America the strong and America the free, but America the beautiful. Today that beauty is in danger. The water we drink, the food we eat, the very air that we breathe, are threatened with pollution. Our parks are overcrowded, our seashores overburdened. Green fields and dense forests are disappearing....

A third place to build the Great Society is in the classrooms of America. There your children's lives will be shaped. Our society will not be great until every young mind is set free to scan the farthest reaches of thought and imagination. We are still far from that goal....

These are three of the central issues of the Great Society.... So, will you join in the battle to give every citizen the full equality which God enjoins and the law requires, whatever his belief, or race, or the color of his skin?

Will you join in the battle to give every citizen an escape from the crushing weight of poverty?

Will you join in the battle to make it possible for all nations to live in enduring peace—as neighbors and not as mortal enemies?

Will you join in the battle to build the Great Society, to prove that our material progress is only the foundation on which we will build a richer life of mind and spirit?


Thinking Critically
1. Documentary Analysis
   What are some of the specific elements that Johnson included in his definition of the Great Society?

2. Historical Interpretation
   Knowing that Johnson idolized Franklin Roosevelt, what parallels do you see between the Great Society and the New Deal?
Johnson's first agenda was the stalled civil rights bill. Everyone expected the bill that Kennedy had submitted to be watered down. Johnson, normally the great compromiser, would not allow any tampering with the bill. He was determined to keep every section intact. He broke with his Senate mentor, Richard Russell of Georgia who led the opposition to the bill, and, instead, made an alliance with the Republican Senate Minority Leader, Everett Dirksen of Illinois. With Dirksen's help, Republicans and Democrats overcame a Russell-led filibuster. The most sweeping civil rights bill since Reconstruction was passed and signed by Johnson on July 2, 1964. It included not only provisions for equal access and equal opportunity but also specifically forbade discrimination in employment based on race, color, religion, and national origin as well as outlawed discrimination based on sex, a clause that later feminists would use most effectively. The law established a new Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to ensure enforcement.

As Johnson pushed hard for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, he also tackled a broader agenda. In his first State of the Union speech in January 1964, Johnson said, “This administration, today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America.” Then in May, he used the commencement speech at the University of Michigan to describe what he called the Great Society, which would be how he described all of his domestic programs. Kennedy had already started efforts to attack poverty in the United States, but Johnson, the New Dealer from Texas, had seen what federally financed rural electrification did to change the lives of poor people and was passionate (see Map 26-1). He idolized Franklin Roosevelt and wanted to imitate him. He also knew that if he wanted to remain in office, he would have to face a skeptical electorate in only 11 months and he wanted to present a solid track record.

The first legislation of the war on poverty was passed by Congress in August 1964. It included provisions for many of the programs later associated with the Great Society, including Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), a domestic peace corps that recruited young people to work for a year serving in high poverty urban and rural settings; a Neighborhood Youth Corps to provide jobs for poor youth (modeled on the Civilian Conservation Corps of the New Deal era); work study loans and grants to support college students; small business loans; community action programs directed at building up grass-roots organizing ventures; Head Start to provide poor children with the same sort of readiness for kindergarten that their more well-off counterparts got at home; Neighborhood Legal Services that provided government funded lawyers for the poor; and to coordinate all of these ventures, an Office of Economic Opportunity. This impressive agenda was only a first step for Johnson, but to do more, he needed to be elected in his own right.

Johnson wanted to not only win election in 1964 but also win with such a mandate that nothing could stand in the way of his programs. Before he could do that, however, Johnson had to face a divided Democratic Party, a Republican opponent, and his own inner demons. Johnson’s insecurities ran deep. He knew that the Kennedy family despised him. He knew that he did not have their urbane sophistication and that, a century after the Civil War, much of the country still distrusted southerners. He also knew—powerfully so—that he had become president—the office he had wanted all his life—only through a terrible tragedy.

Despite his concerns, however, Americans saw LBJ as the sitting president who had taken command of the situation when JFK was killed, and Johnson had no serious resistance to the 1964 nomination. Notwithstanding, Johnson was under great pressure to name Attorney General Robert Kennedy as his running mate. There was a logic to the move; Bobby (as he was always known) was keeper of the Kennedy legacy and his nomination would unite the party. Still, as Johnson later wrote, “With Bobby on the ticket, I’d never know if I could be elected on my own.” In addition, Johnson deeply disliked Bobby Kennedy. He was convinced that Bobby had tried to derail his own vice presidential nomination in 1960. Eventually, LBJ informed Bobby that he
would not be his running mate and, instead, supported him in a successful run for the U.S. Senate from New York. Johnson selected liberal Minnesota Senator Hubert Humphrey to be his vice president. Humphrey, though more liberal than Kennedy or Johnson, was also deeply loyal to Johnson, perhaps even to a fault.

The most serious challenge to Johnson’s easy nomination came from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), in which grass-roots civil rights activists sought the convention seats of the regular Mississippi delegation that had been elected in white-only caucuses (see Chapter 25). Although Johnson was a supporter of civil rights, he was concerned that, if the “regular” Mississippi delegates were unseated by the Mississippi Freedom delegates and walked out, and those from
Goldwater, an affable and tolerant individual, had friends across the political spectrum and spurned personal racial prejudice. However, he opposed civil rights legislation as an invasion of personal freedom. He felt the same way about the graduated income tax and most other government programs. Further, he called for a more aggressive opposition to communism than that taken by Eisenhower, Kennedy, or Johnson, even in places where communist regimes were well established, saying that America, “could lob one into the men’s room at the Kremlin.” He won most of the primary contests, and when the Republican convention met in San Francisco, the delegates were so committed to him that they shouted down Nelson Rockefeller. When Goldwater spoke, he said, “Let me remind you that extremism in defense of liberty is no vice...and that moderation in pursuit of justice is no virtue.” It was just what the delegates wanted to hear. It was less popular, however, with the wider electorate.

The Democrats made good use of Goldwater’s statements, developed a sophisticated television advertising campaign, and painted Goldwater as a dangerous man. Johnson won in a landslide. As he left the inaugural ball in January 1965, Johnson told his staff, “Don’t stay up late. There’s work to be done. We’re on our way to the Great Society.” The next day that work started.

In the spring of 1965, the triumphant Johnson pushed four major pieces of legislation through Congress in addition to a raft of other bills that, on their own, would have been considered significant with any other Congress. The core Great Society legislation of 1965 included federal aid to education, Medicare and Medicaid, immigration reform, and a Voting Rights Act.

Johnson knew that federal aid to education had been blocked for many years by civil rights activists out of the fear that aid might go only to segregated schools and by a deadlock between Catholic representatives, who would not support aid unless it went to parochial as well as public schools, and many Protestant representatives, who would never support aid to Catholic schools. Johnson was determined to break the deadlock. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 solved the first issue since it made it illegal for any segregated institution to receive federal aid. Johnson solved the divide on religion with a policy by which federal education funds would follow the child, whichever school the
child was in. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act was submitted to Congress in January 1965 and passed in 3 months. Johnson signed it at a ceremony in front of a school that he had once attended, with one of his former teachers sitting beside him.

Every Democratic president since Franklin Roosevelt had also sought to provide federal health insurance, especially for the elderly. A coalition, led by the American Medical Association, fearing government control of medical practices, stopped every effort. However, half of all Americans over 65 had no health insurance and they, too, were a powerful constituency. Within months of being proposed, Congress created Medicare, offering basic medical insurance to everyone over 65. Arkansas Congressman Wilbur Mills, a close Johnson ally, added a provision to the Medicare bill, creating Medicaid, which provided federal funding for medical insurance to Americans living in poverty. For some old and poor people, the resulting Medicare and Medicaid legislation enabled the first visit to a medical doctor in their lives.

Even though there was not a lot of pressure to reform the nation’s immigration laws in the 1960s, Johnson was determined to make immigration reform a part of the Great Society. The highly restrictive laws of 1921 and 1923 drastically limited immigration, virtually cutting off anyone from eastern Europe, Africa, or Asia (see Chapter 19). Pressure for change came from New York Representative Emanuel Celler who had tried and failed to get an exception to the old and restrictive “national origin” quotas so that Jews could flee Nazi Germany and who was now determined to change the law (see Chapter 23).

The Immigration Act of 1965 abolished the old quotas though it hardly made immigration easy. The legislation held the total number of immigrants at 290,000 (the number who were expected annually under the old law), but established priorities for education and skills rather than national origin. The law also provided an important loophole, allowing immigration above the new quota for close relatives of U.S. citizens, including foreigners who married a citizen. Although little change was expected when the legislation was signed, the new immigration law represented the beginning of a significant new era of immigration, one that matched and then exceeded the number of immigrants who came to the United States from 1890 to 1920.

The fourth major piece of legislation that Congress enacted in 1965 was the Voting Rights Act. As 1965 began, Johnson did not have additional civil rights legislation on his agenda. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the most significant Congressional intervention in civil rights since Reconstruction. Johnson wanted to focus in 1965 on other aspects of his Great Society and did not relish another round of conflict with Richard Russell and other southern Senators. Civil rights leaders, however, did not mean to take a back seat to anyone else’s agenda.

Martin Luther King, Jr., decided to create a national confrontation around the right to vote (see Chapter 25). The 1964 Civil Rights Act banned segregation in public accommodations and the use of federal funds for any segregated institution, but it did not address the right to vote. In many parts of the Deep South, more than 90 percent of blacks were kept off the voting rolls. As they had for decades, county voting registrars used literacy tests and other techniques to make it extremely hard for a black person to register to vote, and, as Fannie Lou Hamer’s eloquent testimony at the 1964 Democratic convention showed, when legal techniques failed, outright violence was used. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party may not have gotten seated at that 1964 convention, but they had made an impression on many Americans. King and the SCLC were determined to keep the issue of the vote for African-Americans alive. When they selected Selma, Alabama, as the site for a major confrontation, SNCC, which had focused on voting rights from its founding, agreed to join. Segregation in Selma was rigid, despite the Civil Rights Act. The city of 29,000 included 15,000 blacks of voting age. Only 355 of those black citizens were registered to vote.

The demonstrations in Selma, Alabama, and the violent response shocked the world. On Sunday, March 7, as the Selma marchers began to cross the Edmund Pettis
Bridge, sheriff's deputies charged them on horseback, clubbing people right and left. John Lewis, the head of SNCC (and a future member of Congress) was one of several people who were knocked unconscious. Pictures of "Bloody Sunday," as the day became known, were shown around the world. Two weeks later, marchers, now protected at Johnson's directive by the Alabama National Guard, finally completed a march to the state capital of Montgomery. That evening, the marchers happily sang "We have overcome." But the same evening, KKK members followed one of their supporters, Viola Liuzzo of Detroit, as she drove black marchers home from the event, and killed her. The country had had enough of this sort of violence.

Only a week after the Bloody Sunday march, Johnson went before Congress to give one of his most memorable speeches. He told Congress and the nation:

This time, on this issue, there must be no delay, no hesitation, and no compromise with our purpose...Because it is not just Negroes, but really it is all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome.

Hearing the first president from the South since the Civil War speak uncompromisingly of the right to vote while using the words of the civil rights movement's hymn moved many to tears.

The Voting Rights Act, which with unrelenting pressure from Johnson passed Congress by overwhelming majorities, gave the U.S. Department of Justice the right to intervene in any county where 50 percent or fewer of the eligible voters were registered—virtually all of the Deep South. Agents could monitor literacy or other tests and if necessary appoint new federal registrars. On August 6, 1965, Johnson signed the law in the same room where Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation 102 years earlier (see Map 26-2).

View on MyHistoryLab
Map Impact of the Voting Rights Act of 1965

MAP 26-2 The impact of the Voting Rights Act. This map shows the significant increase in African-American voter registration between 1960 and 1966 as a result of the Voting Rights Act.
With the Voting Rights Act, the Immigration Act, Medicare and Medicaid, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and a host of other measures, Johnson was doing what he knew how to do best, getting federal legislation, federal money, and federal enforcement powers to address specific issues. He was certainly not without his critics. Many worried that the education funds were being used to expand already bloated school bureaucracies. Medicare and Medicaid seemed to be a huge new federal program that would eventually bankrupt the country. The Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, though popular, also created disaffection with Johnson and the Democratic Party that would, as Johnson knew, turn many southerners into Republicans.

Johnson’s own personality was also a problem. Although he was a master of legislation and gave some of the most memorable speeches of any president, he was also a very difficult person. He could be crude and cruel, especially to those closest to him. George Reedy, who served as Johnson’s Press Secretary and saw him close up, said, “[A]s a human being he was a miserable person—a bully, sadist, lout, and egoist....[H]is lapses from civilized conduct were deliberate and usually intended to subordinate someone else do to his will.” Such behavior might be effective when arm twisting was the only way to get a bill through Congress, but they also left precious little reservoir of good will when Johnson got into trouble. After 1965, Johnson got into a lot of trouble, especially in foreign policy.

Reflecting on the Johnson administration, Averill Harriman, a senior adviser to every president from Roosevelt to Johnson, said, “LBJ was great in domestic affairs.... [I]f it hadn’t been for...Vietnam he’d have been the greatest President ever.” In analyses of the Johnson presidency, “If it hadn’t been for Vietnam” is a steady refrain. The war in Vietnam destroyed national support for Johnson and the Great Society. The war divided Americans as no war since the Civil War. Opposition to and support for the war created a new political divide within the country and destroyed many long-standing allegiances. Cynicism about the conduct of the war became cynicism about government itself and eventually all authorities. The war cost 58,000 American lives, and many thousands more were wounded in body and mind in the turmoil of Vietnam. Whatever one’s ultimate judgments about the U.S. effort in Vietnam, it is impossible to understand the history of the United States in the late 1960s and beyond without understanding the impact of that war.

Vietnam

Kennedy’s foreign policy priorities were Cuba and Berlin. Until the final weeks of his life, he did not pay a lot of attention to Vietnam. When Kennedy became president, the United States had less than 1,000 troops in Vietnam, sent to train the South Vietnamese army. Slowly, JFK authorized small increases not only to train troops but also to join them on combat missions against infiltrators from the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and their allied South Vietnamese insurgents organized as the National Liberation Front (NLF). So called counterinsurgency and strategic hamlet programs were designed to find and destroy enemy forces. Unfortunately the violence of these missions and the corruption of the South Vietnamese regime under the leadership of the increasingly despotic Ngo Dinh Diem undermined popular support. Diem was part of a Catholic elite minority in a country where the majority was Buddhist. Although his Christianity and his anti-Communism made him an appealing figure in the United States, his despotic and corrupt administration alienated many Vietnamese.

In the summer of 1963, fierce protests were mounted within South Vietnam against the Diem regime. Quang Duc, a Buddhist monk, burned himself to death on June 11 to protest conditions, and more protests and self-immolations followed. Kennedy’s new ambassador to Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., lost all faith in Diem and, with Kennedy’s tacit agreement, supported a military coup against Diem. The CIA-backed coup took place on November 1, and Diem and his brother were killed, something Kennedy had not necessarily expected. And then, 3 weeks later, Kennedy was dead, and some 17,000 U.S. military “advisers” were in Vietnam.
As he became president, LBJ wanted to use the office to focus on domestic policy. From the beginning, however, he felt he could not ignore Vietnam, and like Kennedy, Eisenhower, and Truman, he insisted, "I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went [to communism]." It was a fateful vow. Equally fateful was the fact that, on balance, Johnson himself was as insecure about foreign policy as he was secure about domestic policy. Winning a war was a very different thing from getting Congress to pass a bill. LBJ kept Kennedy's foreign policy advisers, and most of them were convinced that communism had to be contained around the globe. If communist North Vietnam threatened noncommunist South Vietnam, then, they believed, the United States needed to protect the noncommunist south, however unpalatable the fight might be.

Plans for expanding the war were on Johnson's desk from the day he became president and, although he eventually implemented them, he did delay expanding the U.S. involvement in Vietnam (see Map 26-3). He wanted to defeat Barry Goldwater in the 1964 elections, and part of his strategy was to paint Goldwater as a crazy warmonger. He also wanted to get the Great Society legislation through Congress. Even so, Johnson said in retrospect, "I knew from the start that I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the woman I really 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....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."

Johnson convinced himself that being "seen as an appeaser" in Vietnam would lead to new Soviet and Chinese aggression elsewhere, just as appeasement with Germany had led to World War II. He was intimidated by the Kennedy legacy of toughness in foreign policy and was convinced that, if he did not find a way to save South Vietnam, "There would be Robert Kennedy out in front leading the fight against me, telling everyone that I had betrayed John Kennedy's commitment to South Vietnam....that I was a coward." For a Texan who had grown up on stories of the heroes of the Alamo, being called a coward was simply beyond contemplation. Johnson's fear proved to be ironic since, 4 years later, Robert Kennedy would run as an antiwar candidate against Johnson.

Throughout 1964, LBJ increased the military advisers modestly, from 17,000 to 23,000, but he did all he could to keep Vietnam off of the front pages in the election year after the 1963 CIA-backed coup in South Vietnam. The one big exception came on August 1, when there were reports that a North Vietnamese torpedo boat fired on the U.S. destroyer Maddox, Johnson ordered an immediate military response. Johnson also went to Congress and asked for a resolution granting him the right to use "all necessary measures" to repel any attacks against the U.S. forces in Vietnam. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution passed easily—unanimously in the House and with only two dissenting votes in the Senate—and in later years, it was this resolution, rather than any further congressional action, that presidents Johnson and Nixon used to prosecute the war. Only years later did historians discover that there was no solid evidence that anything had been fired at the Maddox, or a second destroyer that had come to aid it, during the August encounter, but Johnson got the power he wanted.

After Johnson's inauguration in January 1965, the military situation in South Vietnam deteriorated badly—North Vietnamese forces controlled perhaps half the land and people of the south. Johnson's key foreign policy advisers, especially Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, urged a major escalation of U.S. involvement. Some, especially Undersecretary of State George Ball, opposed escalation but, in early 1965, most were calling for more troops.

In February 1965, Johnson said, "I can't ask our American soldiers out there to continue to fight with one hand tied behind their backs," and launched a major bombing campaign against North Vietnam to stop the flow of supplies to the south. As the bombing expanded—3,600 runs in April, 4,800 by June—the United States also sent more ground forces to protect the American air base at Danang. Once there, these
troops also engaged in battle and then needed more troops to support them. Fifty-thousand troops were in Vietnam by April of 1965, and the number rose to 75,000 by midsummer. By July, Secretary McNamara, noting that the bombing alone was not defeating the northern forces, urged that the U.S. troop strength be increased from 75,000 to more than 200,000. Johnson agreed. But he did not want to go to Congress for authorization, fearing that it would disrupt the Great Society legislation. So he quietly asked for an additional appropriation for the war and announced a troop increase at a midday news conference devoted to other issues. The result was that although Johnson won short-term success for his domestic programs, he planted the seeds of long-term distrust.

For the next 2 years, combat in Vietnam expanded. Eventually, half a million U.S. troops were in Vietnam. Numbers at that level could be sustained only by an increased
As more and more U.S. soldiers arrived in Vietnam, they found themselves on more patrols such as the one pictured here.

Military draft. Deferments became difficult to get, especially for minority and working-class men. Casualty numbers also grew, undermining morale among the troops and at home. Costs mushroomed. In 1965, the military budget was $49.6 billion; by 1968, it was $80.5 billion. Try as they might, the U.S. commanders could not get the South Vietnamese army to play a major role in the war. They avoided battle when they could and seemed to have an uncanny way of knowing where danger was and leaving those sites to the Americans.

As U.S. soldiers did more of the fighting, they also saw less purpose to what they were doing. Troops went out on search-and-destroy missions, and then came back to their bases with little to show other than a list of enemy soldiers killed. One soldier asked, “What am I doing here? We don’t take any land…We just mutilate bodies.” An American officer, speaking of his company’s attack on the village of Ben Tre, which was suspected of harboring NLF supporters, said, “We had to destroy the village in order to save it.” Destroying villages to “save” them, marching into the jungle, engaging in battles with enemy forces—battles that the U.S. troops almost always won—but then coming back to their bases while the enemy forces reorganized in the jungle were strategies that seemed pointless to most soldiers. The U.S. commander in Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, kept providing optimistic reports. Few were convinced.

Racial tensions often exploded in Vietnam. In 1965, 12.6 percent of the troops were black but 24 percent of combat deaths were of black soldiers. Black soldiers, who knew that civil rights workers were being killed in Alabama and Mississippi at home, believed that they were often being sent on the most dangerous missions. Many became increasingly angry at their fellow troops, at their officers, and at the war.
While morale disintegrated on the ground in Vietnam, public support for the war also evaporated. By launching the war quietly, Johnson had not built public support. Many Americans had a natural tendency to support the president and the troops at first, but that support declined rapidly. Vietnam was the nation's first televised war. Television did not actually show a lot of combat; many of the battles were at night or far from cameras. Nevertheless, footage of troops going into combat as well as pictures of dead and wounded American soldiers brought the war into American living rooms. Lack of clear progress created doubt. Opposition to the war built with each news report, each draft call, and each casualty list.

While critics have rightly pointed out that no more than 20 percent of college students took part in antiwar demonstrations, and those demonstrations were mostly on elite campuses such as the University of California at Berkeley, Columbia, and Harvard, few campuses anywhere were untouched by antiwar fervor, especially as many students worried about draft calls or felt the guilt at being protected by their student status while friends went off to Vietnam. As the war escalated, those participating in campus-based teach-ins—gatherings at which experts or better informed students taught others about Vietnam—heard mostly from critics of the war. The first March on Washington to end the war took place in April 1965. At that rally, 25,000 people heard SDS president Paul Potter say, "The incredible war in Vietnam has provided the razor, the terrifyingly sharp cutting edge that has finally severed the last vestige of illusion that morality and democracy are the guiding principles of American foreign policy." In 1966, 1967, and 1968, the teach-ins became angrier and the disaffection with the government greater. As early as 1966, demonstrators were not only calling for American withdrawal from Vietnam but also waving NLF flags and chanting, "Ho, Ho Ho Chi Minh, The NLF is gonna win."

Students were far from the only opponents of the war. The Women's Strike for Peace, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the Catholic Worker Movement were pacifist organizations who had opposed the war from the beginning. In addition, more religious leaders began to speak out about the specific war in Vietnam. Catholic priests Daniel and Philip Berrigan and Henry Sloan Coffin, the Protestant chaplain at Yale University, became leading antiwar activists.

Established civil rights groups did not want to risk a break with the Johnson administration when LBJ was doing so much to support civil rights. Even so, SNCC
was the first among them to oppose the war. A 1966 SNCC position paper attacked a war "to preserve a 'democracy' which does not exist at home." In April 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr., stood in the pulpit at New York's Riverside Church to tell the civil rights movement and the nation that he had come to see that the war was sending poor and black Americans 8,000 miles away to fight for rights that they did not have in the United States. "Somehow this madness must cease," he pleaded.

As the war continued, some opponents took their opposition to a new level. When some 35,000 demonstrators surrounded the Pentagon and tried to disrupt daily business in Washington in October 1967, the government reacted harshly with mass arrests of the protestors. Between 50,000 and 100,000 young men left the United States, most of them moving to Canada, to avoid serving in a war they thought was wrong. Many of those who moved to Canada eventually returned to the United States, especially after presidential pardons granted by presidents Ford and Carter, but some 50,000 Americans became permanent residents of Canada as a result of the Vietnam War while others stayed in neutral nations like Sweden.

In 1967, a group of young men in San Francisco announced that they were staying in the United States but refusing to cooperate with the military draft in any way. "We will renounce all deferments and refuse to cooperate with the draft in any manner, at any level," they said. Draft resistance, and a willingness to be arrested for the act, was a new stage in the protest movement. Later, Dr. Benjamin Spock (whose book on child care had been the bible for the parents of many of those now refusing the draft) and Rev. William Sloan Coffin were arrested for urging draft resistance.

Still others took their protests to other forms of direct action to try to stop the war. In May 1969, opponents of the war, including some religious leaders, walked into the offices of Dow Chemical Company, which made the napalm jelly that was used to burn, kill, and maim in Vietnam, and poured blood into filing cabinets and on office equipment to disrupt the workings of the offices.

While opposition to the war in Vietnam broadened, Johnson isolated himself with trusted advisers. He agonized about casualty reports, wept while signing letters of condolence to those who had lost a loved one in the war, and regularly got up at 4:00 and 5:00 a.m. to check on casualty figures. He never seriously considered changing course and stopped talking to those who suggested that he should. He authorized the CIA, which was only supposed to operate abroad, to spy on American antiwar leaders who he became convinced were communists, and he authorized the FBI to infiltrate and disrupt the antiwar movement. Johnson brought the army commander in Vietnam, General Westmoreland, to Washington, DC, in November 1967 to tell Americans that there was "light at the end of the tunnel" in Vietnam. By that time, fewer Americans were convinced.

1968

In 1968, the growing tensions of war, race, and change in America seemed to explode. Few were untouched by the anger and fear that the year provoked.

Two months after General Westmoreland's optimistic assessment, the light at the end of the tunnel in Vietnam dimmed considerably. On January 30, 1968, the first day of Tet, the Vietnamese lunar new year, North Vietnamese and NLF forces attacked everywhere across South Vietnam, all at once. They blew a hole in the wall surrounding the American embassy in Saigon and came close to getting into the inner compound. They attacked the distant Marine post at Khe Sanh. They took control of the old Vietnamese capital city of Hue. And they attacked American and South Vietnamese forces all over the country. Eventually, the Tet Offensive was beaten back, at terrible cost to the North Vietnamese. By one estimate, the North lost 40,000 troops compared to 2,300 South Vietnamese and 1,100 Americans. Even so, the North had won an important victory. Public trust in Westmoreland and Johnson was never restored. The president and the general had said that the United States was winning the war, but now it certainly looked like it was losing. Johnson's popularity dropped.
from its already low 40 percent approval rating to 26 percent. Walter Cronkite, the anchor of the CBS Evening News and perhaps the most trusted journalist in the country, who had maintained careful neutrality in his reporting, traveled to Vietnam after Tet and returned to tell his viewers, “It seems more certain than ever that the bloody experience of Vietnam is to end in a stalemate.” Many agreed.

When Westmoreland responded to the Tet offensive by asking for even more troops, beyond the 525,000 Americans already in Vietnam, Johnson’s new Secretary of Defense told the president, “We seem to have a sinkhole… I see more and more fighting with more and more casualties on the U.S. side and no end in sight to the action.” Secretary of State Rusk, long a supporter of the war, recommended a bombing halt and an offer of negotiations with North Vietnam. Johnson hated the advice, but he could no longer ignore it.

At the same time, Johnson’s lack of popularity was catching up with him. Everyone assumed that, as an incumbent president, Johnson would seek and easily win his party’s nomination for another term in office. But the antiwar mood was growing, in the country and in the Democratic Party. On March 12, 1968, in the nation’s first primary vote in New Hampshire, Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy, who had become a strong opponent of the war, won 42 percent of the votes against LBJ’s 49 percent. Many who had participated in antiwar demonstrations decided to be “clean for Gene” and campaign door to door in New Hampshire. They found a ready electorate, people of many different persuasions, including those who were fed up with the seemingly endless war and those who were frustrated because LBJ seemed unwilling either to commit the force needed to win or to withdraw. The New Hampshire vote was far too close for a sitting president.

Even worse than the challenge from McCarthy, at least from Johnson’s perspective, was one from New York Senator Robert Kennedy, whom Johnson loathed. Bobby Kennedy realized that McCarthy’s win could mean LBJ’s defeat for the nomination and that, since McCarthy had opened the way, it was a good time to challenge an incumbent of his own party. While McCarthy was little-known, Bobby was perhaps the best known politician in the country. Soon after the New Hampshire vote, Kennedy announced that he was entering the contest. For many who opposed the war, wanted further social change, and dreamed of a return to the glory days of the JFK presidency, Bobby’s 1968 campaign was a dream come true. His campaign struck an emotional chord among both supporters and opponents—seldom seen in American politics.

On March 31, 1968, just weeks after the New Hampshire vote, Johnson gave a nationally televised speech. He announced plans to reduce the bombing as “the first step to desescalate the conflict.” He called on Ho Chi Minh to “respond positively and favorably to this new step for peace.” Then he surprised the country, perhaps himself, by adding, “I shall not seek, and will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president.” Johnson, the ultimate politician, knew that public trust was essential to govern. And by March 1968, he had lost that trust. North Vietnam did respond, and the road to peace had begun. It would be a long and painful road, however, one that would last far beyond the end of Johnson’s term. Johnson’s career and his hopes for the country had become casualties of Vietnam—though very far from the only casualties.

Four days after Johnson’s surprise announcement, Martin Luther King, Jr., was shot and killed in Memphis, Tennessee, where he was supporting a strike by the city’s garbage collectors. With the murder of King, the leading spokesperson for nonviolence, many felt that the cause of nonviolence itself had been damaged. Riots erupted all over America. Police arrested 20,000 people in 130 cities in the week following King’s assassination. Forty-six people, 41 of them black, were killed. Urban America seemed to be coming unglued.

The riots that followed King’s death reflected the deep anger in much of the African-American community. In Oakland, California, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale had founded the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in 1966. Newton and Seale insisted that urban police forces had become occupying armies in the black community. Following a
California law then in place allowing unconcealed weapons, the Panthers conducted their own armed patrols of Oakland as a defense. Such an armed presence, however, almost assured violence. A 17-old Panther, Bobby Hutton, was killed the same month as King. Many more Panthers would be killed in subsequent years. The Panthers always remained a tiny fringe group, as popular for swagger as for their breakfast programs and their commitment to armed self-defense. Even so, while small, they were a symbol that many blacks embraced a move away from the self-sacrificing nonviolence of King to a more angry and militant stance.

Two weeks after King’s death and the urban riots, students at Columbia University, led by the SDS chapter, took over the president’s office and refused to leave. Four buildings were held by white students and a fifth building, separately, by black students. The Columbia sit-in was a protest over the university’s war-related research and a university plan to build a new gymnasium in the park that separated the university from Harlem. In addition, it reflected far-reaching anger toward all authorities. After 8 days, the university administration called on the police to clear the buildings and they did. The violence of the police move onto the campus—during which more than a hundred demonstrators were injured—also pointed to the deep fault lines in the nation. The mostly working-class white police were furious at the white students whom they considered privileged snobs. The student revolt at Columbia was one of many. Students protesting the war or local issues took over buildings, held mass rallies, disrupted classes, and burned war-related research materials on more than 150 campuses in the 1968–69 academic year.

In the face of this violent, some said crazy, time in American history, Bobby Kennedy continued his campaign for the presidency. On June 5, Kennedy won the California Democratic Primary. It was the capstone to his campaign. He not only championed the antiwar cause, but befriended César Chavez of the Farm Workers Union, rural whites in Appalachia, Puerto Rican immigrants living in New York City, American Indians on isolated reservations, and urban blacks in city after city, as no candidate had ever done. Then, only moments after his California victory speech, Kennedy was shot by an Arab nationalist. He died days later. As with King, many hopes died with Kennedy.

When the Democratic Party convention finally took place in Chicago in August 1968, Kennedy was dead. The McCarthy campaign had been sidelined. The party nominated Hubert Humphrey, LBJ’s loyal vice president who had not entered a single primary. Humphrey had long been a darling of the liberal wing of the party, but his silence on Vietnam and his steadfast loyalty to the increasingly unpopular Johnson meant that he had lost the trust of many.

While the convention met to hear speeches and act on the nomination, protests erupted inside and outside the convention hall. Many delegates protested on the floor of the convention itself. Huge demonstrations were also planned for Chicago during convention week by demonstrators who had their own divisions. One faction, led by long-time pacifist David Dellinger, wanted a nonviolent but militant protest against the war, LBJ, and Humphrey. Another group, for whom Tom Hayden and Rennie Davis of the SDS were the most prominent, wanted a more direct confrontation that they knew might provoke police violence. Finally, a group who called themselves Yippies, led by Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, believed that the best way to protest was to make fun of the Democrats and the Chicago police in every way possible.

Chicago’s mayor Richard Daley was determined to quash all demonstrations. As the convention met, the police attacked the demonstrators with tear gas and billy clubs in the glare of television cameras. They attacked delegates. They attacked the press. Nationally known reporters

Black Panther Party founders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. The Panthers advocated a radical economic, social, and educational agenda that made it the target of a determined campaign of suppression and elimination by the police and the FBI.
Dan Rather and Mike Wallace were both roughed up. As crowds chanted, "The whole world is watching," the violence in Chicago was broadcast around the world. One McCarthy delegate described what he saw from his hotel window, "Cops chased kids off into the park and out of sight among the trees, emerged with one cop dragging a boy or girl by the leg and another cop running alongside clubbing in the groin. A man tried to carry a bleeding woman into the hotel, and they were both clubbed and thrown into the wagon."

In the aftermath of the convention, a commission appointed to investigate what had happened described it as a "police riot." The fact that this could happen, with "the whole world watching," represented how deeply divided Americans were in 1968.

The November 1968 presidential election presented three choices. First was Hubert Humphrey and his vice presidential nominee, Maine Senator Edmund Muskie, a ticket that barely seemed to limp out of the Chicago convention. Humphrey said later, "My wife and I went home heartbroken, battered, and beaten." But there were two other contenders in the 1968 race.

In addition, Governor George Wallace of Alabama, who had made his name blocking school integration, had launched a strong third-party campaign in 1968. To the surprise of many, he qualified for the ballot in all 50 states. Wallace and his running mate, Air Force General Curtis LeMay, seemed to have broad support, ranging from the most conservative groups in the country—including the KKK and the John Birch Society—to the many white southerners opposed to racial integration to many in the North who were appalled by riots and antiwar demonstrations. With comments like, "If any demonstrator every lays down in front of my car, it'll be the last car he'll ever lay down in front of," Wallace courted what he called the "law and order" vote.

Third, the Republican Party emerged from its summer convention as united as the Democrats were divided. Richard M. Nixon, who had lost to John Kennedy in 1960, spent the intervening 8 years quietly laying the groundwork for a political comeback. He collected many political debts and cashed them all in to win the 1968 nomination on the first ballot. His running mate was Maryland Governor Spiro Agnew, who had once been seen as a liberal but who, especially after the Baltimore riots following King's death, had become a voice of white backlash against what he called the "circuit-riding, Hanoi-visiting, caterwauling, riot-inciting, burn-America-down" types in the black and white community. Nixon announced a "secret plan" to end the war in Vietnam and otherwise ran a carefully scripted, television-savvy, and very expensive campaign. The Republicans outspent the Democrats almost two to one.

In early fall, it seemed as if Nixon was unstoppable, in spite of Wallace's popularity. Nixon's major theme "Working Americans have become the forgotten Americans," his promise to do something different in Vietnam (no one knew what), and his success in representing anti-Johnson sentiment without getting specific all worked in his favor. An early poll gave him 43 percent of the vote to Humphrey's 28 percent and Wallace's 21 percent. Humphrey, however, ran a surprisingly strong campaign. He tried to repair the Democratic coalition, distanced himself from Johnson, and reached out to his longtime supporters. At the same time, Nixon struck some as too smooth, and a vote for Wallace seemed a wasted vote. By election day, the polls said the race between Humphrey and Nixon was too close to call.

Nixon won the November election, by a close vote of 37.7 million to 37.1 million, while Wallace took almost 10 million votes. Nixon's electoral college lead was greater: 301 to 191. The Democrats retained both houses of Congress, however. Humphrey
won 97 percent of the black vote but only 35 percent of the white vote. Between them, Nixon and Wallace had won 57 percent of all of the votes, a significant backlash against Johnson's huge 1964 victory, against the war, and against the demonstrators who opposed it. In 1968, Americans were more deeply divided by race and class and region than they had been in many years, and anything approaching national consensus was a distant dream. The election results also showed that Vietnam would remain an unsolved issue for a new administration.

Quick Review How did the war in Vietnam impact Great Society programs, the Johnson presidency, and the country?

CONCLUSION

In contrast to the 1950s, which represented a time of relative stability and complacency for some Americans, the 1960s ushered in a period of intense activism and social upheaval that in one way or another touched most. Writers and artists began to criticize almost all aspects of American culture and helped set in motion the modern ecological conservation movement, the feminist movement, a new focus on poverty, and a vocal antiwar movement. Perhaps the most iconic of these movements was the student movement. In 1960, a small group of students formed Students for a Democratic Society, which sought to end war, racial injustice, and economic inequality. In its early years, members of that organization engaged in marches, protests, and other forms of direct action to counter government policies inconsistent with their stated mission.

Despite increasing social activism across the nation, President John F. Kennedy remained concerned more with foreign than domestic issues. President Kennedy and his wife Jacqueline Kennedy brought youth, charm, and energy to the White House. Although Kennedy achieved some domestic victories, he was preoccupied, to a large extent, with Cuba, Germany—especially Berlin—and the Soviet Union. After the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, Cuban ties to Russia grew. The Soviets sent military personnel to the Caribbean island, and in 1962, the Russians began building bases in Cuba for housing missiles capable of reaching the United States. A clash between the United States and the Soviet Union seemed inevitable, but the two nations reached an agreement that resolved the crisis and thereby avoided a potentially cataclysmic confrontation.

In November 1963, Kennedy was assassinated and Lyndon Johnson became president. Unlike his predecessor, Johnson attempted to focus more on domestic rather than on foreign policy issues and, in fact, was remarkably successful in advancing his domestic policy goals, which he called the Great Society. During his tenure, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, a new immigration law, and the Voting Rights Act, as well as created Medicare and Medicaid health insurance and greatly expanded federal aid to education and the poor. Still, Vietnam was a lingering problem. As Johnson steadily increased U.S. involvement in Vietnam, opposition to the war intensified at home.

In 1968, mounting tensions in American society exploded. In the midst of the violence, at home and abroad, Johnson announced that he would not seek another term as president. Four days afterward, Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated and race riots broke out across the country. Two months later, Robert Kennedy was shot and killed. At the 1968 Democratic Party convention, protests erupted outside the convention hall, and the police attacked demonstrators as well as onlookers in what was later called a “police riot.” While the Democratic Party was fracturing, the Republican Party seemed strong. Nevertheless, the presidential race of 1968 was a very close one. The tumultuous year ended with the election of Republican candidate Richard Nixon to the presidency.