

ONE VIEW ON AMERICAN CULTURE IN THE 1960'S

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## One View of American Culture in the 1960's

James Reston referred to the years immediately prior to the 1970s as years of long and divisive conflict. As the nation moved through the 1960s conflict intensified. The underlying questions were what are acceptable ways for groups to protest perceived injustices and what is government's role, especially the federal government, in mandating social policy. To understand the intensity of the conflict it is imperative to understand that each conflicting group truly believed deeply in its values and perception of justice. The two issues that most visibly showed this conflict were civil rights and the military action in Vietnam. While civil rights was primarily a Black issue, other minorities and women sought government redress for unequal treatment.

All of these were sources of intense conflict. However Civil rights, especially Black civil rights directly affected the most people. The issue had bedeviled and divided the nation for over a century. Not only did it cause conflict between the races, but also among Blacks there was disagreement about how to achieve it. Blacks generally agreed that government should mandate it and enforce it. Whites were divided. Some whites, especially in the generation that came of age in the 1960s actively supported Black civil rights. Others of all ages opposed it. The balance of power between Federal and state governments was disputed. Whites directly resisted Black demands for equality. They were bitterly divided into opposing camps. Ultimately this led to radical realignment in both major political parties. It altered the balance of political power in the country. The political alignment forged in the depression was displaced by a new alignment of interests that lasted from the end of the 1960s to at least the end of the century. The

proper role of the Federal government was one great issue that drove this. Civil rights were part of it. Based on their perceptions about civil rights and the ensuing conflicts, millions of Americans shifted their political allegiance. No other issue caused as much intense disunity. No other issue so fully engaged deeply enshrined beliefs. No other led to such major changes. For these reasons, civil rights was the most important issue in the 1960s. What was the nature of the conflict? What views were held by each side? How were these conflicts seen by ordinary Americans, Richard Nixon's "Silent Majority."<sup>1</sup>

The background of Black striving for equality is needed to understand the role civil rights played in the 1960s. While the origins of the Black civil rights movement began even before the Civil War, World War II marked a major turning point in Black demands for equality. A Black, Philip Randolph in 1941 fought for equal pay for the Porters and Sleeping Car Attendant's Union. At the end of World War II Robert F. Williams, a veteran and chairman of his local NAACP, typified the attitude of many blacks that having fought and died for America, they had earned equal treatment. Williams advocated self-defense including the use of guns. The NAACP formed a legal defense committee. A case initiated by them led to another major turning point in the battle for Black civil rights. It came in 1954 when the Supreme Court ruled school desegregation unconstitutional.<sup>2</sup> Blacks held the Federal Government responsible for enforcing this. Whites in the affected states resisted.

In 1960 college students, black and white, became actively involved and civil rights became a mass movement. They employed the non-violent principles embraced by Martin Luther King, Jr. which had dominated the civil rights movement in the years immediately following the Supreme Court decision. King's leadership role began with in

the successful 1955 bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. Subsequently the principles were used as the Federal government employed the National Guard to force desegregation in Little Rock.

In the spring of 1960 four black students began a sit-in at the segregated lunch counter at the downtown Woolworth's in Greensboro, NC. They were refused service. They returned the next day with 23 protesters. Local white students, women, joined by the end of the week. Confrontations with local white workers erupted. By April lunch counter sit-ins were taking place in 54 different southern cities. Reacting to the Greensboro sit-ins, one group of black students formed the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to seek social justice embracing nonviolence and appealing to conscience.<sup>3</sup> SNCC quickly attracted the support of thousands of whites.<sup>4</sup> The Greensboro sit-ins initiated the massive use of non-violent civil disobedience in the civil rights movement. Greensboro also marked the beginning of direct student involvement in the movement. From the first week, white students were involved as well as blacks.

Black students founded SNCC. In the summer of 1960 white students formed the Students for a Democratic Society. Two years later they laid out their principles in *The Port Huron Statement*. They wanted to “replace power rooted in possession, privilege and circumstance by power and uniqueness rooted in love, reflexiveness, reason and creativity” and sought to create a society to “encourage independence in men and provide the media for their common purpose.”<sup>5</sup> SDS consistently and actively supported the civil rights movement throughout the 1960s.

However white opposition in the North had already begun and white student opposition was formalized that year. Conservative Northern intellectuals opposed the civil rights movement. *The National Review*, a conservative journal edited by William F. Buckley, Jr., consistently supported Southern resistance. The magazine went to far as to assert the racial superiority of the white race as well as supporting state's rights to overrule the Federal government.<sup>6</sup> In the summer of 1960, on Buckley's estate in Sharon CT, a group of students formed the Young Americans for Freedom. They explicitly stated that role of the Federal government is "the preservation of law and order, the provision of national defense, and the administration of justice. THAT when government ventures beyond these rightful functions, it accumulates power which tends to diminish order and liberty."<sup>7</sup> Their definition of justice did not include Black civil rights. By the end of 1960 the major divisions were in place. The Federal government had used force in the face of state opposition to desegregation. Adult white political conservatives opposed white liberals. The SDS and YAF had fundamentally different views about the role of government and civil rights. While the non-violent civil disobedience principles of Martin Luther King, Jr. dominated, others did not abandon the ideas of Robert Williams.

In Washington Democrats who controlled the Executive and Legislative Branches were divided. Southern Democrats, a key source of political power since the 1930s were segregationists. John Kennedy was a Northern liberal. Realizing the danger civil rights posed to the Party, in the early years of the 1960's the Federal government allow protests to continue but refused to take part. This was clearly seen in 1961 when a group sponsored by CORE that included members of SNCC decided to challenge segregated seating in interstate transportation. Planning to embark on interstate busses departing

from Washington, DC in May, they sought help from the Justice Department, the FBI, and President Kennedy. There was no reply.<sup>8</sup> Resistance and physical beatings began in South Carolina.<sup>9</sup> The ride led to arrests and violence in Alabama. Ultimately several were driven to the Tennessee state line and abandoned. They made their way to Nashville. At this point, Robert Kennedy intervened with the Greyhound bus company. They boarded, and passing state police cars in many places along the road, reached Montgomery Alabama without further incident.<sup>10</sup> Southern white opposition to integration was firmly in place. The Federal government was reluctant to get involved

Public pressure continued to mount on the government. In the spring of 1963, violent opposition to civil rights had raised the consciousness and sympathy of northern whites to the point that John Kennedy addressed the nation on television proposing a major civil rights act that ultimately passed in 1964 after Kennedy's assassination.<sup>11</sup> Despite this, Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson, refused support to the Mississippi Democratic Freedom Party when they arrived at the Democratic National Convention demanding to be seated. Fannie Lou Hamer, one of the organizers, testified before the credentials committee that when she registered to vote, she was evicted from her home.<sup>12</sup> Television networks planned to broadcast the hearings. President Johnson preempted network coverage. Black civil rights had begun to divide the Democratic Party.

Until the summer of 1964 Martin Luther King's concept of non-violent civil disobedience had dominated the civil rights movement. This changed. On June 21 three civil rights organizers were arrested in Meridian Mississippi and taken some 30 miles to the county jail. They were released but en route back to Meridian they disappeared. Their bodies were found on August 4<sup>th</sup>. They had been shot. The deaths caused a

national furor. However, of greater import was a eulogy given at one of the funerals by Dave Dennis a leader in CORE. He reported after the speech that he sensed his prepared remarks were wrong. He improvised. He said the country operates on violence and implied the time had come when violence must be resisted. The ideas expounded by Robert Williams became relevant. Earlier that year Malcolm X, leader of the Black Muslims proclaimed the time had come when blacks would be forced to use “either the ballot or the bullet.”<sup>13</sup> In 1965 the phrase Black Power began to be used by members of SNCC. When Stokely Carmichael rose to the head of SNCC he wrote a position paper that challenged white participation and financial support of SNCC. He viewed this as another paternalistic ploy to subvert black aspirations into the white power structure. He challenged whites to go back into white communities to see the ways white power that had been used to deny black aspirations. He said SNCC should be “black-staffed, black-controlled, and black-financed.”<sup>14</sup> The time of peaceful protest was passing. The rifts within the black community about how to achieve equality were showing. White fears of Black Power reached new heights in 1966 when Huey Newton and Bobby Seale organized the Black Panther Party. Despite the fact that the Panthers did not advocate violence there were two factors that caused this. First, their platform was aimed directly at racial inequality outside the South. Second, and far worse, they had guns. The years of violent protest were beginning.

Violence gave Republicans the opportunity to make political gains in the North. They had already begun to gather support among whites in the South. Opportunity now arose in other parts of the country. Northern support for Black civil rights began to crumble. Violence broke out in other parts of the country. In August 1965 after a black

was arrested by a California Highway Patrol Officer, Blacks rioted in the Watts area of Los Angeles. Five days later the riots had been put down by 16,000 police and National Guardsmen. Thirty-four were dead. 250 buildings had burned and the damage was estimated at forty million dollars.<sup>15</sup> Many whites saw this not as a question of police brutality but black violence. By 1966 Martin Luther King, Jr. was unwelcome in Chicago and had be rushed out of the city. This change in the attitude in white Northerners combined with the outrage of Southern whites was crucial in allowing the Republican Party and the new-conservatives who controlled it to alter the political allegiance of white Americans outside the South. They did not attack the civil rights movement directly. The issue they seized on was law and order. The issue was helped by American's distaste for the increasingly violent protests about the war in Vietnam. By 1968, the people were ready. Richard Nixon seized the phrase. In 1966 he used the concept as a cudgel against the Democrats: "It is my belief that the seeds of civil anarchy would never have taken root in the nation had they not been nurtured by scores of respected Americans, public officials, educators, and civil rights leaders as well."<sup>16</sup> Conservative Republicans also mixed Lyndon Johnson's War of Poverty with civil rights. The War on Poverty was intended to eliminate poverty among poor whites. Conservative rhetoric led the public to see it as a plan to financially support Blacks. All of these issues were intermingled to have the public see this as a general attack on traditional American values of family, hard work, and patriotism.

One example illustrates this among the working classes in rural Pennsylvania. Andy Restek was the owner of a Texaco service station in a small town. He "likes his world, is home, his America."<sup>17</sup> There are blacks living in his neighborhood. He



believed they were lazy and shiftless. Government should not intervene to support them. Like most of his generation he viewed the Vietnam conflict from the perspective of World War II, the war in which he served. The Truman Doctrine articulates this view, that the role of America, a role only America can fulfill, is to promote American democracy throughout the world.<sup>18</sup> Many in the younger generation questioned Andy Restek's values, values he had risked his life for. This attack on his fundamental values, especially combined with violent protest was beyond comprehension. Seeing both major political parties as corrupt, in 1968 he supported the independent presidential candidacy of George Wallace.

The Republican rhetoric also fitted with the beliefs of the middle classes in the heartland of American. These are dramatically shown in a CBS News television documentary. *16 in Webster Groves*. The documentary looked at the lives of 16 year old teenagers and their families in Webster Groves MO in 1966. Webster Groves is a suburb near St. Louis. In 1966 family, financial security and community were the central social values. A college education was the key to future financial security. 84% of the students in Webster Grove's High School expected to go to college. The town was 90% white. Parents were proud of what they had achieved. They saw no reason for anyone to come into town and no reason to leave. They expected their children to follow in their footsteps. They saw no problem with civil rights. Few had even been in the area of town inhabited by blacks. Typical students shunned intellectuals as well as those students who expected to enter the trades. The social elite of the school were called 'normies.' The highest aspiration for a 'normie' girl was to be Queen of the Friendship Dance. Webster Groves typified the realization of the American Dream. It was the kind of town where

people would embrace and support neo-conservative republican principles and likely would continue to do so into the future.<sup>19</sup> The Republicans built a broad base of political support from all of these sources allowing them to dramatically alter basic party loyalties throughout the country.

To conclude, in 1960 John F. Kennedy defeated Richard Nixon in an extremely close presidential election. In his inaugural speech he called for a new era in government based on an ideal of self-sacrifice and service on behalf of others.<sup>20</sup> In 1968 Richard Nixon was elected. This marked the end of Kennedy's vision. The two great issues that divided the nation and led to this were civil rights and Vietnam. Of the two civil rights was more important as it was the issue where there was fundamental disagreement throughout the nation as well as in both political parties. The role of the Federal Government in foreign policy and military affairs was unquestioned. The issue with Vietnam was about a specific conflict. It's doubtful the most radical opponent of the Vietnam military action opposed the US role in World War II. Civil rights was different. A substantial part of the American public opposed it. The nation was fundamentally split about the domestic purposes and role of the Federal Government. Primarily because of the rancor and violence produced by the civil rights movement, the view of the role of the Federal Government established by Franklin Roosevelt was rejected. Neo-conservatives seized control of the Republican Party. They rejected large government and supported limiting its role to foreign policy and defense. They came into power in 1968. Their views have been a major, often controlling, force in American politics from that date. Vietnam was an issue. But civil rights was the issue that truly altered the course of

history and has had a lasting impact on the nation. Civil rights was the most important issue in the 1960s.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided The Civil War of the 1960s Fourth Edition* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2012), 234.

<sup>2</sup> Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided The Civil War of the 1960s Fourth Edition*, 23.

<sup>3</sup> Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, 1960. SNCC Founding Statement. In *“Takin it to the Streets” A Sixties Reader Third Edition*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Brines, 20. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.

<sup>4</sup> Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided The Civil War of the 1960s Fourth Edition*, 30-31.

<sup>5</sup> Students for a Democratic Society, 1962. The Port Huron Statement. In *“Takin it to the Streets” A Sixties Reader Third Edition*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Brines, 54. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.

<sup>6</sup> Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided The Civil War of the 1960s Fourth Edition*, 199-200.

<sup>7</sup> Young Americans for Freedom, 1960. The Sharon Statement. In *“Takin it to the Streets” A Sixties Reader Third Edition*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Brines, 289. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis, John, 1961. The Freedom Rides. In *“Takin it to the Streets” A Sixties Reader Third Edition*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Brines, 23. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis 1961, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis 1961, 24-25.

<sup>11</sup> Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided The Civil War of the 1960s Fourth Edition*, 85-86.

<sup>12</sup> Hamer Fannie Lou 1964. Remarks of Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer. In *“Takin it to the Streets” A Sixties Reader Third Edition*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Brines, 34. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.

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<sup>13</sup> Malcolm X 1964. The Ballot or the Bullet. In *“Takin it to the Streets” A Sixties Reader Third Edition*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Brines, 110. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.

<sup>14</sup> Carmichael, Stokely 1966. The Basis of Black Power. In *“Takin it to the Streets” A Sixties Reader Third Edition*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Brines, 121-123. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.

<sup>15</sup> Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided The Civil War of the 1960s Fourth Edition*, 132-133.

<sup>16</sup> Nixon, Richard, 1966. If Mob Rule Takes Hold in the US. In *“Takin it to the Streets” A Sixties Reader Third Edition*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Brines, 121-123. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.

<sup>17</sup> Novak, Michael, 1968. Why Wallace?. In *“Takin it to the Streets” A Sixties Reader Third Edition*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Brines, 302-303. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.

<sup>18</sup> Truman, Harry S. *Public Papers of the Presidents, Harry S. Truman, 1947*. (Washington D.C., 1963), 179-180.

<sup>19</sup> CBS News, Inc., 1966. “16 in Webster Groves”. mp4 file <http://vimeo.com/12658300> (accessed December 15, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> Isserman and Kazin, *America Divided The Civil War of the 1960s Fourth Edition*, 158.