Chapter 26
The Nation Divides: The Vietnam War and Social Conflict, 1964–1971

Learning Objectives:

After reading Chapter 26, you should be able to:

1. Explain the goals of President Lyndon Johnson during his presidency.
2. Detail what were the purposes of the “Great Society.”
3. Understand the significance of the Warren Court.
4. Discuss how the United States reacted to the Vietnamese revolution.
5. Analyze the Johnson administration’s strategy to win the war in Vietnam.
6. Explain how 1968 became the turning point in the war in Vietnam.
7. Detail the extent and significance of various protests that took place during the 1960s.
8. Discuss how the civil rights movement confronted the limits of its success.
9. Detail the growth of the New Left and the growing antiwar movement.
10. Comprehend the importance of cultural rebellion and the counterculture.
11. Understand how the movement for women’s liberation changed the United States.
12. Discuss the many new fronts of liberation politics, such as gay liberation.
13. Analyze the causes and results of the conservative backlash.
14. Discuss how President Nixon became the most liberal Republican since Teddy Roosevelt.
15. Explain the Nixon administration’s strategy in Vietnam.
16. Discuss the impact of antiwar sentiment at home on ending the war in Vietnam.

Time Line

1962
The Other America published
Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) formed

1963
President Kennedy assassinated in Dallas, Texas
Clean Air Act passed
Gideon v. Wainwright established right of indigent prisoners to legal counsel
The Feminine Mystique published

1964
Lyndon Johnson wins presidency in landslide over Republican Barry Goldwater
1965
Voting Rights Act passed
*Griswold v. Connecticut* protected use of contraception
100,000 more combat troops sent to Vietnam
U.S. invaded Dominican Republic
Malcolm X assassinated

1966
Clean Waters Act passed

1967
Black Panther Party formed in Oakland, California
Haight-Ashbury (San Francisco), Summer of Love

1968
Over 500,000 U.S. troops in Vietnam
Martin Luther King, Jr. assassinated in Memphis
Robert Kennedy murdered in California
Tet Offensive
Richard Nixon elected president

1969
Largest antiwar march in Washington D.C.
Native American activists seized Alcatraz
Stonewall riot marked start of Gay Liberation Movement

1970
First “Earth Day” celebration
Four students killed at Kent State University and two at Jackson State University

1971
Pentagon Papers published by *New York Times*
Voting age reduced from 21 to 18

I. Lyndon Johnson and the Apex of Liberalism

A. The New President

Growing up in rural poverty in Texas, Lyndon Johnson turned out to be more liberal than John F. Kennedy had been. While keeping Kennedy’s anticommunist foreign policy, Johnson turned his attention more closely to problems at home. He sought to perfect American society and
make the U.S. a model for all other nations. In the 1964 elections, Johnson won a landslide victory, winning 61% of the votes cast over conservative Republican Barry Goldwater.

B. The Great Society: Fighting Poverty and Discrimination

To create what he called the Great Society, Johnson declared a “War on Poverty.” With one out of five Americans living below the official poverty line, Johnson pushed a number of programs to help raise these people’s standard of living. Attacked as wasteful by the right and inadequate by the left, these programs did reduce the number of poor people by a third, although poverty remained. Johnson also shed his segregationist voting record and became the most vocal presidential supporter of racial equality. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 made desegregation the law of the land. The Voting Rights Act outlawed poll taxes and allowed federal intervention to ensure that African Americans were allowed to vote.

C. The Great Society: Improving the Quality of Life

Johnson’s vision included the new Medicare system that paid for the medical needs of Americans over 65 and provided health care for the poor. Johnson’s surgeon-general issued the first warning that smoking was linked to cancer. Higher federal emission standards forced automakers to produce safer cars. Growing public concern about the environment led to the Clean Air Act (1963) and the Clean Waters Act (1964). Even the tradition of dam building was revisited and restricted in the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (1968).

D. The Liberal Warren Court

Although appointed Chief Justice of the Supreme Court by Republican President Eisenhower, Earl Warren steadily expanded individual rights. In *Gideon v. Wainwright* (1963), indigent prisoners were guaranteed the right to counsel, while *Escobedo v. Illinois* (1964) confirmed the right to have a lawyer present during interrogation. The Warren Court limited the practice of requiring prayers in public schools, while *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965) established contraceptive devices as a matter of choice protected by the constitution. The Court overturned laws against interracial marriage and President Johnson appointed NAACP legal counsel Thurgood Marshall to become the first black Supreme Court justice. These rulings made the Warren Court a target for conservatives who saw the court as promoting wrongful social change.

II. Into War in Vietnam

A. The Vietnamese Revolution and the United States

Vietnamese nationalists led by Ho Chi Minh and the Indochinese Communist party sought to free their nation from French colonial rule. During World War II, the Vietnamese nationalists, or
Vietminh, had worked closely with the United States against the Japanese. With the defeat of Japan, Vietnam was declared an independent country, with American OSS officers looking on.

But cold war attitudes won out and the United States, along with Britain, backed the French in their bid to regain control of Vietnam. Fighting lasted from 1946 until the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. A temporary division of the country was agreed upon until elections could be held. The U.S. decided to prop up the southern half of Vietnam as an anticommunist regime and refused to allow the promised elections. The Vietminh in the south began a sabotage campaign and formed the National Liberation Front (NLF) to reunify the nation. By the time of his assassination, President Kennedy had increased the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam to 16,000; even so, the NLF continued to make gains.

B. Johnson’s War

Believing that American credibility was at stake, President Johnson faced an NLF which was winning the political war in the south. Without either a national debate or a congressional declaration of war, Johnson escalated the number of American troops. Fearful that if he withdrew, Republicans would attack him as McCarthy once had attacked Democrats for “losing China,” Johnson sent 100,000 combat troops to Vietnam in 1965. His attempt to bribe Ho Chi Minh to give up the struggle in the south in return for massive American aid failed and the U.S. Air Force dropped more bombs on Vietnam than had been used by all sides during World War II. These tactics caused one-fourth of the southern population to become refugees.

C. Americans in Southeast Asia

Confident of victory and dismissing the Vietnamese as primitive, American soldiers who went to Vietnam in 1965-1966 soon found matters less optimistic. Few Vietnamese, not even anticommmunists, viewed the southern government, often referred to by the name of its capital Saigon, as legitimate or democratic. Everyone knew it was kept in power only by foreign support whereas in the North, there was a government which had defeated the French colonialists.

Along with underestimating the NLF and North Vietnamese, the U.S. assumed that the communists had no popular support. In fact, Ho Chi Minh was extremely popular and the U.S. intervention just made him more so. As the war expanded, the NLF grew and their superior organization and commitment enabled them to overcome their lack of firepower.

The 3 million Americans who went to Vietnam were at first drawn from the professional army but, as the war escalated these professionals were joined by hundreds of thousands of young draftees. The U.S. army became an army of teenagers, as it was filled with 18-year-olds who mainly wanted to survive their 12-month tour of duty. As frustration mounted towards an enemy who fought a hit-and-run guerrilla war, many G.I.s began to slide toward a racial war against all Vietnamese. Although many U.S. soldiers resisted this trend, atrocities on both sides
inevitably took place. The most publicized was the March 16, 1968 My Lai massacre committed by Lieutenant William Calley and his troops, in which more than 400 women, children, and old men were tortured and killed.

D. 1968: The Turning Point

In late 1967, the U.S. remained publicly upbeat about the war, and General Westmoreland stated that he saw some light at the end of the tunnel. Privately, however, important members of Johnson’s administration were beginning to have serious doubts. All thought of an immediate victory was crushed by the Tet Offensive of January 30th, when NLF and North Vietnamese units attacked U.S. strong points across the country, even occupying the courtyard of the U.S. embassy in Saigon. Although the U.S. won the battle militarily, the blow to American confidence was irreversible.

In the same period as Tet, two other crises would convince many among the elite that American power was spread too thin. The first crisis was the seizure of the U.S. spy ship Pueblo in the Sea of Japan by North Korea, who temporarily imprisoned the crew. The other blow was the financial collapse of the British pound, which caused Great Britain to withdraw from its positions east of the Suez Canal and meant the United States would have to move into this vacuum. All of these problems combined to cause a run on the dollar, promoting fear of another 1929-style depression. Finally, Lyndon Johnson’s political career was ruined and he announced on March 31st that he would not run for the nomination of his now deeply divided Democratic Party.

III. The Movement

A. From Civil Rights to Black Power

Having won an end to legal discrimination, the civil rights movement splintered by 1966, as racial prejudice continued despite the new legislation. The Justice Department and FBI seemed to do little to restrain the Ku Klux Klan’s campaign of anti-civil rights violence. Even well-intentioned white liberals often tried to take over and manage African Americans lives. So for many younger African Americans, the need for greater independence from white America became more important than cooperation. In 1964, Cassius Clay won the heavyweight boxing championship and the next day announced he was a Black Muslim and was changing his name to Muhammad Ali.

Violence was an issue as matters shifted towards black power. Militants like Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown called for African Americans to defend themselves against white violence. Malcolm X called on blacks to “stop singing and start swinging,” and the Black Panther Party
was later formed in Oakland to respond to police brutality. Uprisings and riots swept black urban communities during the summers of 1964-1968. Ninety people died and 4,000 were injured in just the year 1967, mainly African Americans killed by white people.

Of greater importance than the talk or reality of violence was the cultural movement that promoted pride in African Americans and African history and life. African Americans began to refer to themselves as “black” rather than “Negro.” Politically, the sixties saw the election of black officials to offices previously closed to people of color.

B. The New Left and the Struggle Against the War

In the summer of 1962, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was formed, based on a charter known as the Port Huron Statement, which called for an end to racism and war. Hoping to promote a new type of participatory democracy, SDS saw itself as the white counterpart to black student radicals. SDS was to be the central organization of the New Left and it devoted itself particularly to critiquing “corporate liberalism.” New Leftists saw anti-communism as a distraction from the real problems of the nation, particularly as the Vietnam War was escalated.

After 1965, the broad reform agenda of SDS began to narrow more and more towards stopping the war in Vietnam. Like their African American counterparts, the white New Left grew more alienated and radical as they realized the extent of government deceit and corporate power. SDS began cheering for Ho Chi Minh and ultimately broke apart in confusion, as warring factions argued for a revolution against imperialism and capitalism.

C. Cultural Rebellion and the Counterculture

If the New Left wanted to reform America and later overthrow the status quo, the counterculture wished to create an alternative society. Young people, often called “hippies,” alienated by materialism, competition, and conformity, looked forward to a new America free from hypocrisy and artificially. These people attempted to live their lives with the alternative values of gentleness, tolerance, and inclusivity. To expand their self-knowledge, members of the counterculture often turned to mind-altering drugs, such as marijuana, peyote, hashish, LSD, and cocaine.

By its very essence, the counterculture had no strictly defined membership. Millions of Americans took part, to at least a limited degree, by smoking marijuana and listening to rock music. Older Americans experienced the counterculture mainly as outside spectators, while corporations soon realized that a huge market existed for records, clothing, jewelry, and natural foods.

One visible change of the 1960s was what is often called the sexual revolution. New attitudes removed some of the penalties for premarital and extramarital sex, while the introduction of the birth control pill freed women from the fear of pregnancy. Attitudes towards abortion also
became more accepting and the Supreme Court established a women’s right to abortion in *Roe v. Wade*. For women, the sexual revolution was a double-edged sword, as it legitimated female sexuality but also created new sexual pressures from men.

D. Women’s Liberation

The movement for women’s liberation grew in the late 1960s to battle all kinds of limitations and sexist expectations. The new belief that “the personal is political” came from younger, mostly white women who were veterans of the civil rights and antiwar movements. This new wave of feminism sparked intense debates about gender. Feminists argued about whether or not women were basically the same as men or whether womanhood was biological. Radical feminists supported lesbianism, while the National Organization of Women (NOW) did not even support gay rights until 1973. Women of color often found that racial and class oppression was more important than gender and many working-class women found the complaints of many feminists to be the distant dissatisfactions of women of the leisure class.

E. The Many Fronts of Liberation

As with women’s liberation, the Chicano, pan-Indian, and gay liberation movements were based on previous organizing within their communities. The most visible organization of Latinos was the movement led by Cesar Chavez to form a farm workers union. National consumer boycotts of grapes and iceberg lettuce helped win recognition of the United Farm Workers (UFW). Among young Mexican Americans, there were increased efforts to fight against discrimination while at the same time promoting pride in their cultural heritage.

Puerto Ricans, heavily concentrated on the East Coast, became more militant and nationalistic, as young people formed the Young Lords in 1969. Native Americans, the poorest Americans, tried to reinvigorate their communities. To publicize their grievances, a group of Native Americans seized the island of Alcatraz and occupied it for a year and a half. In 1973, members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) occupied buildings at Wounded Knee, South Dakota for two months. Among the gay and lesbian community, the open atmosphere of the late 1960s gave young militants space to express their anger at the homophobic prejudice and violence common in the U.S.

IV. The Conservative Response

A. Backlashes

The first backlash was against people of color who were asserting themselves as never before. Whites condemned black “ingratitude” and associated the civil rights and black power movements with increased crime rates and riots. Although economically and socially oppressed, people of color were supposed to emulate mainstream white society. When they didn’t, many whites became hostile.
The backlash went beyond race to include a defense of traditional hierarchies against the 1960s rebellion. Proud of their lives and values, older whites could not understand the dissent and disrespect of the young. The United States remained one of the most religious of industrialized nations and conservative Christians saw protest as sinful disobedience towards lawful authority. Older whites feared the effect of drugs and changing sexual morals on their children. This backlash even had a class component, as working-class whites resented both well-off campus radicals and poor people of color.

B. The Turmoil of 1968 at Home

The conservative backlash was fed by the events of 1968. The Tet Offensive in Vietnam shocked patriotic citizens, who could not understand why the U.S. had not won the war. Riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. spread fear among whites, while the Democratic Party fell apart after the murder of Robert Kennedy and the televised police riot during the Chicago convention. Into this sea of anger and confusion came George Wallace, racist governor of Alabama, who ran for president as an independent and Richard Nixon, the Republican presidential nominee who promised “law and order” and claimed to have a secret plan to end the war in Vietnam. Democratic nominee Hubert Humphrey lost by less than 1 percent of the popular vote.

C. The Nixon Administration

Unlike President Johnson, Richard Nixon was mainly interested in foreign policy and found domestic programs dull. Although he campaigned as a conservative, after attaining power, Nixon became the most liberal Republican president since Teddy Roosevelt. This was clear in his support for the Environmental Protection Agency (1970) and various legislation such as the Endangered Species Act (1973). Although Nixon personally cared little about ecology, he understood the bipartisan popularity of such actions.

Nixon was not so soft on antiwar demonstrators. He hated them. The President appealed to conservative southern whites and northern ethnic Democrats to stand up for the “silent majority” and oppose protesters. Following the lead of presidents before him, Nixon used the FBI, CIA, and military intelligence agencies to infiltrate and disrupt antiwar dissenters and nonwhite nationalists. He compiled an “Enemies List” of Americans he wanted observed or harassed. When the Pentagon Papers were leaked to the New York Times, Nixon created a covert team called the plumbers to “plug leaks” even if it meant breaking the law.
D. Escalating and Deescalating in Vietnam

Nixon understood the limits of U.S. power and planned on pulling back from Vietnam. First, however, he wished to preserve U.S. “credibility” by a massive show of force. Nixon ordered intensified air strikes against North Vietnam and the secret bombing and invasion of Cambodia and Laos. On April 30, 1970, students by the hundreds of thousands protested the Cambodian invasion, with over 700 campuses effected. By now, a clear majority of Americans were opposed to the war. Some returning veterans organized the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) and held public hearings into the war crimes they had witnessed. The number of occurrences of U.S. soldiers killing their own officers escalated before the peace accords were signed and the war ended in 1973.

Identification

Explain the significance of each of the following:

1. Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party:

2. “Great Society”:

3. Young Americans for Freedom (YAF):

4. Bob Moses:

5. The Other America:


8. Ngo Dinh Diem:

9. Gulf of Tonkin Resolution:
10. Tet Offensive:

11. Dinks:

12. Senator Eugene McCarthy:

13. Cassius Clay:

14. Malcolm X:

15. Students for a Democratic Society (SDS):

16. New Left:

17. Weather Underground:

18. Jefferson Airplane:


20. *The Feminine Mystique*:

21. United Farm Workers (UFW):

22. American Indian Movement:

23. *All in the Family*:
24. George Wallace:

25. “Southern Strategy”:

26. Henry Kissinger:

27. Vietnam Veterans Against the War:

28. “fragging”:

29. Twenty-Sixth Amendment:

30. National Liberation Front:

**Multiple Choice Questions:**

1. President Lyndon Johnson was personally most interested in
   A. establishing a reputation as a statesman.
   B. eliminating poverty in the United States.
   C. establishing a minimal role for the federal government.
   D. promoting unrestricted markets for business.
   E. all of the above.

2. In the 1964 presidential election, Senator Barry Goldwater was
   A. the Republican candidate.
   D. defeated almost two to one by Lyndon Johnson.
   E. the candidate of right-wing conservatives like the Young Americans for Freedom.
   F. running as a Senator from Arizona.
   G. all of the above.
3. The “War on Poverty”
   A. actually increased the number of poor Americans.
   B. reduced the number of poor by one-third between 1960 and 1969.
   C. was the main campaign proposal by Senator Goldwater in 1964.
   D. was first proposed by President Eisenhower.
   E. all of the above.

4. Which of the following was NOT part of the “Great Society” vision?
   A. reducing the number of poor Americans.
   B. Public Broadcasting System (PBS)
   C. Medicare
   D. higher federal auto safety standards
   E. Social Security.

5. Earl Warren, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, was known for
   A. being the first African American appointed to the Supreme Court
   B. having been Democratic governor of Massachusetts.
   C. giving wider powers to the police to make arrests.
   D. his liberal views.
   E. all of the above.

6. The Vietnamese nationalists led by Ho Chi Minh
   A. defeated the French in 1954.
   B. were more popular than the U.S.-backed Saigon regime.
   C. had more bombs dropped on them by the U.S. than all sides used in World War.
   D. scored a political victory with the Tet Offensive.
   E. all of the above.

7. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution was
   A. a substitute for a declaration of war.
   B. the first time Congress had refused funds for the Vietnam War.
   C. announced by President Ho Chi Minh in April, 1965.
   D. all of the above.
   E. none of the above.

8. Unable to tell friend from foe, many U.S. soldiers in Vietnam began to
   A. assume all civilians were friendly.
   B. wage a racist war against all Vietnamese.
   C. refuse to go into combat with ARVN troops.
   D. overcome frustration and relax.
   E. none of the above.
9. The Tet Offensive proved to be a
A. military defeat for the NLF and North Vietnam.
B. political victory for the NLF and North Vietnam.
C. blow to American confidence in President Johnson.
D. all of the above.
E. none of the above.

10. The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) were
A. formed out of Youth for LBJ.
B. the youth group of the Democratic Party.
C. the central organization of the New Left.
D. all of the above.
E. none of the above.

11. The counterculture of the 1960s
A. was based on deep Christian beliefs.
B. was co-opted by capitalists who marketed anti-materialist commodities.
C. was absolutely the same as the New Left.
D. was largely sponsored by Communist Party front organizations.
E. all of the above.

12. *Roe v. Wade* established a woman’s constitutional right to
A. abortion.
B. divorce.
C. birth control devices.
D. equal pay for equal work.
E. child support.

13. Founded in 1966, the National Organization of Women (NOW) was
A. a Communist front organization.
B. formed to lobby against sexual discrimination.
D. largely, at first, made up of working-class women of color.
E. all of the above.

14. White backlash first developed in response to
A. the increasing assertiveness of people of color.
B. the war in Korea.
C. the decline of nonwhite nationalism.
D. discrimination against people from Europe.
E. all of the above.
15. The Pentagon Papers were a classified Defense Department study revealing
A. Nixon’s role in Watergate.
B. who killed President Kennedy.
C. the poverty of citizens in the rural South.
D. the U.S. needed more atomic bombs.
E. that the government had been lying to the public about Vietnam.

MAP QUESTION:

After looking at Map 26.3, explain what, if any, pattern you can see for various types of
protests. Where did most of the political assassinations take place? Why?

CONNECTING HISTORY

Discuss why wars traditionally mean the limitation, if not the end, of social reform within the
United States. Can you give recent examples to support your argument?

INTERPRETING HISTORY

Explain what you think motivated Martin Luther King, Jr. to link the war in Vietnam with
poverty and racism at home.

Answers to Multiple Choice Questions

1. C
2. E
3. B
4. E
5. D
6. E
7. A
8. B
9. D
10. C
11. B
12. A
13. B
14. A
15. E