The 1960s in America: Crash Course US History #40

Crash Course: U.S. History
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Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course US history, and today we're going to talk about the 1960s.

[John Green from the past]: Mr. Green, Mr. Green! Great, the decade made famous by the narcissists who lived through it.

Hey, me from the past! Finally, you and I agree about something wholeheartedly. But while I don't wish to indulge the baby boomers' fantasies about their centrality to world history, the '60s were an important time. I mean, there was the Cold War, Vietnam, a rising tide of conservatism (despite Woodstock), racism. There were the Kennedys and Camelot; John, Paul, George and, to a lesser extent, Ringo; and of course, there was also Martin Luther King Jr.

[Introduction sequence]

So the 1960s saw people organizing and actively working for change, both in the social order and in government. This included the student movement, the women's movement, movements for gay rights, and a push by the courts to expand rights in general. But by the end of the 1960s, the anti-war movement seemed to have overshadowed all the rest.

So as you'll no doubt remember from last week, the civil rights movement began in the 1950s, if not before, but many of its key moments happened in the '60s, and this really began with sit-ins, that took place in Greensboro, North Carolina. Black university students walked into Woolworth's and waited at the lunch counters to be served, or more likely, arrested. After five months of that, those students eventually got Woolworth's to serve black customers.

Then, in 1961, leaders from the Congress on [of] Racial Equality launched "Freedom Rides" to integrate interstate buses. Volunteers rode the buses into the deep South, where they faced violence, including beatings and a bombing in Anniston, Alabama. But despite that, those freedom rides also proved successful, and eventually, the ICC desegregated interstate buses.

In fact, by the end of the '60s, over 70,000 people had taken part in demonstrations, from sit-ins, to teach-ins, to marches. But they weren't all successful; Martin Luther King's year-long protests in Albany, Georgia didn't end discrimination in the city, and it took JFK ordering federal troops to escort James Meredith to class for him to attend the University of Mississippi.

The University of Mississippi: America's fallback college. Sorry, I'm from Alabama.

So the civil rights movement reached its greatest national prominence in 1963, when Martin Luther King came to my home town of Birmingham, Alabama, where there had been more than 50 racially motivated bombings since World War II. Television brought the reality of the Jim Crow South into people's homes, as images of Bull Connor's police dogs and water cannons being turned on peaceful marchers, many of them children, horrified viewers, and eventually led Kennedy to endorse the movement's goals.

I should probably mention that Kennedy was president of the United States at the time, having been elected in 1960, he was assassinated in 1963, leading to Lyndon Johnson. ALRIGHT, politics over!

Anyway, in response to these peaceful protests, Birmingham jailed Martin Luther King, where he wrote one of the great letters in American history. It doesn't have a great name: Letter from Birmingham Jail.

1963 also saw the March on Washington, the largest public demonstration in American history (up to that time), where King gave his famous speech, "I Have a Dream". King, and the other organizers, called for a civil rights bill and help for the poor, demanding public works, a higher minimum wage, and an end to discrimination in employment. Which eventually, in one of the great bright spots in American history, did sort of happen, with the Civil Rights Act.

So, one reason American history teachers focus on the civil rights movement so much is that it successfully brought actual legislative change. After being elected president, John F. Kennedy was initially cool to civil rights, but to be fair, the Cold War occupied a lot of his time, what with the Cuban missile crisis, and the Bay of Pigs, and whatnot. But the demonstrations of 1963 pushed John F. Kennedy to support civil rights more actively.

According to our dear friend the historian Eric Foner, "Kennedy realized that the United States simply could not declare itself the champion of freedom throughout the world, while maintaining a system of racial inequality at home. "

So that June he appeared on TV and called on Congress to pass a law that would ban discrimination in all public accommodations. And then, he was assassinated. Thanks, Lee Harvey Oswald. Or, possibly someone else, but probably Lee Harvey Oswald.

So then Lyndon Johnson became president, and he pushed Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The law prohibited discrimination in employment, schools, hospitals, and privately owned public places, like restaurants and hotels and theaters, and it also banned discrimination on the basis of sex.

The Civil Rights Act was a major moment in American legislative history, but it hardly made the United States a haven of equality. So civil rights leaders continued to push for the enfranchisement of Africa Americans. After Freedom Summer workers registered people in Mississippi to vote, King launched a march for voting rights in Selma, Alabama in January 1965. And again, television swayed public opinion in favor of the demonstrators. Thank you TV, for your one and only gift to humanity. Just kidding, Battlestar Galactica.

So in 1965, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act, which gave the federal government the power to oversee voting in places where discrimination was practiced. In 1965, Congress also passed the Hart-Celler Act, which got rid of national origin quotas and allowed Asian immigrants to immigrate to the United States. Unfortunately, the law also introduced quotas on immigrants from the Western Hemisphere.

Lyndon Johnson's domestic initiatives from 1965 through 1967 are known as the Great Society, and it's possible that if he hasn't been responsible for America escalating the war in Vietnam, he might have been remembered, at least by liberals, as one of America's greatest presidents. Because the Great Society expended a lot of the promises of the New Deal, especially in the creation of health insurance programs, like Medicare for the elderly, and Medicaid for the poor. He also went to war on poverty. Never go to war with a noun. You will always lose.

Johnson treated poverty as a social problem, rather than an economic one. So instead of focusing on jobs or guaranteed income, his initiative stressed things like training. That, unfortunately, failed to take into account shifts in the economy away from high wage union manufacturing jobs towards more lower wage service jobs.

Here's what Eric Foner had to say about Johnson's domestic accomplishments: "By the 1990s, the historic gap between whites

and blacks in education, income, and access to skilled employment narrowed considerably. But with de-industrialization and urban decay affecting numerous families and most suburbs still being off limits to non-white people, the median wealth of white households remained ten times greater than that of African Americans, and nearly a quarter of all black children lived in poverty." While Congress was busy enacting Johnson's Great Society programs, the movement for African American freedom was changing. Let's go to the thought bubble.

Persistent poverty and continued discrimination in the workplace, housing, education, and criminal justice system, might explain the shift away from integration and towards black power, a celebration of African American culture and criticism of white suppression. 1964 saw the beginnings of riots in city ghettos, for instance, mostly in northern cities. The worst riots were in 1965 in Watts, in southern California. These left 35 people dead, 900 injured, and $30 million in damage. Newark and Detroit also saw devastating riots in 1967. In 1968, the Kerner report blamed the cause of the rioting on segregation, poverty, and white racism.

Then there's Malcolm X, who many white people regarded as an advocate for violence, but who also called for self-reliance. It's tempting to see leadership shifting from King to X as the civil rights movement became more militant, but Malcolm X was active in the early 1960s, and he was killed in 1965, three years before Martin Luther King was assassinated and before all the major shifts in emphasis toward black power.

Old civil rights movements like CORE abandoned integration as a goal after 1965 and started to call for black power. The rhetoric of black power could be strident, but its message of black empowerment was deeply resonant for many. Oakland's Black Panther party did carry guns in self-defense, but they also offered a lot of neighborhood services. But the Black Panther movement turned many white people away from the struggle for African American freedom, and by the end of the 1960s many Americans' attention had shifted to the anti-war movement.

Thanks, Thought Bubble. So, it was Vietnam that really galvanized students, even though many didn't have to go to Vietnam because they had student deferments. They just really, really didn't want their friends to go. The anti-war movement and the civil rights movement inspired other groups to seek an end to oppression. Like Latinos organized to celebrate their heritage and end discrimination. Latino activism was like black power, but much more explicitly linked to labor justice, especially the strike efforts led by Cesar Chavez and the united farm workers.

The American Indian movement, founded in 1968, took over Alcatraz, to symbolize the land that had been taken from Native Americans, and they won greater tribal control over education, economic development, and they also filed suits for restitution. And in June of 1969, after police raided a gay bar called the Stonewall Inn, members of the gay community began a series of demonstrations in New York City which touched off the modern gay liberation movement.

Oh, it's time for the mystery document?! The rules here are pretty simple: I read the mystery document, guess the author, I'm either right or I get shocked. Alright, what do we got here?

"If the Bill of Rights contains no guarantee that a citizen shall be secure against lethal poisons distributed either by private individuals or by public officials, (I already know it) it is surely only because our forefathers, despite their considerable wisdom and foresight, could conceive of no such problem."

Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*! Yes, I am on such a roll! *Silent Spring* was a massively important book because it was the first time that anyone really described all of the astonishingly poisonous things we were putting into the air and the ground and the water. Fortunately that's all been straightened out, and everything that we do and make as human beings is now sustainable. What's that? Oh God.

The environmental movement gained huge bipartisan support, and it resulted in important legislation during the Nixon era, including the Clear Air and Water Acts, and the Endangered Species Act. And yes, I said that environmental legislation was passed during the Nixon administration.

But perhaps the most significant freedom movement, in terms of number of people involved and long-lasting effects, was the American feminist movement. This is usually said to have begun with Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique*, which set out to describe quote, "The problem that has no name." Turns out the name is misogyny.

Friedan described a constricting social and economic system that affected mostly middle class women, but it resonated with the educated classes and led to the foundation of The National Organization of Women in 1966. Participation in student and civil rights movement led many women to identify themselves as members of a group that was systemically discriminated against. And by systemic, I mean that in 1963, 5.8% of doctors were women, and 3.7% of lawyers were women, and fewer than 10% of doctoral degrees went to women. They are more than half of the population.

While Congress responded with the Equal Pay Act in 1963, younger women sought greater power and autonomy in addition to legislation. Crucially, '60s era feminists opened America to the idea that the personal is political, especially when it came to equal pay, child care, and abortion.

Weirdly, the branch of government that provided most support to the expansion of personal freedom in the 1960s was the most conservative one: the Supreme Court. The Warren court handed down so many decisions expanding civil rights that the era has sometimes been called a rights revolution. The Warren Court expanded the protections of free speech and assembly under the First Amendment, and freedom of the press in the *New York Times v. Sullivan* decision; it struck down a law banning interracial marriage in the most appropriately named case ever: *Loving v. Virginia*.

And, although this would become a lightning rod for many conservatives, Supreme Court decisions greatly expanded the protections of people accused of crimes. *Gideon v. Wainwright* secured the right to an attorney, *Mapp v. Ohio* established the exclusionary rule under the Fourth Amendment, and *Miranda v. Arizona* provided fodder for Channing Tatum in his great movie *21 Jump Street*, ensuring that he would always have to say to every perp, "You have the right to remain silent." But you can't silence my heart, Channing Tatum. It beats only for thee.

But the most innovative and controversial decisions actually established a new right where none had existed in the constitution. *Griswold v. Connecticut* dealt with contraception, and *Roe v. Wade* guaranteed a woman's right to an abortion, at least in the first trimester, and those two decisions formed the basis of a new right: the right to privacy.

Protests, the counter culture, and the liberation movements continued well into the 1970s, losing steam with the end of the Vietnam war and America's economy plunging into the toilet. For many though, the year 1968 sums up the decade.

1968 began with the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, which stirred up the anti-war protest. Then, racial violence erupted after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr on April 4th, 1968. Then anti-war demonstrators (as well as some counter culture types) arrived in large numbers at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, where they were set upon by police and beaten, in what was later described as a police riot.

1968 also saw the Prague Spring uprising in Czechoslovakia crushed by the Soviets, and student demonstrators were killed by the police in Mexico City where the Olympics were held, and Parisian students took to the streets in widespread protests against, you know, France. All this unrest scared a lot of people, who ended up voting for Richard Nixon and his promises to return to law and order.

Ultimately, like any decade or arbitrary historical age, the '60s defies easy categorization. Yes, there were hippies and liberation movements, but there were also reactions to those movements. On this one I'm just gonna leave it up to Eric Foner to summarize the decade's legacy.

"The 1960s made possible the entrance of numerous members of racial minorities into the mainstream of American life, while leaving unsolved the problem of urban poverty. It set in motion a transformation of the status of women. It changed what Americans expected from government - from clean air and water to medical coverage in old age.

"And at the same time, it undermined confidence in national leaders. Relations between young and old, men and women, and white and non-white, along with every institution in society, changed as a result."

But there's one last thing I want to emphasize: All of this wasn't really the result of like a radical revolution. It was the result of a process that had been going on for decades. I mean, arguably, a process that had been going on for hundreds of years. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

[End credits]

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Thank you again for watching, and as we say in my hometown, there's always money in the banana stand!