CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: WAR ABROAD, WAR AT HOME, 1965-1974

VIETNAM: AMERICA’S LONGEST WAR
  Johnson’s War
  Deeper into the Quagmire
  The Credibility Gap

A GENERATION IN CONFLICT
  “The Times They are A-Changin”
  From Campus Protest to Mass Mobilization
  Teenage Soldiers

WARS ON POVERTY
  The Great Society
  Crisis in the Cities
  Urban Uprisings

1968
  The Tet Offensive
  King, the War, and the Assassination
  The Democratic Campaign
  “The Whole World Is Watching!”

THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY
  Black Power
  Sisterhood Is Powerful
  Gay Liberation
  The Chicano Rebellion
  Red Power
  The Asian American Movement

THE NIXON PRESIDENCY
  The Southern Strategy
  Nixon’s War
  “The China Card”
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WATERGATE
  Foreign Policy as Conspiracy
  The Age of Dirty Tricks
  The Fall of the Executive

CONCLUSION

KEY TOPICS
* Widening U.S. involvement in the war in Vietnam
* “The sixties generation” and the antiwar movement
* Poverty and urban crisis
* The election of 1968
* The rise of “liberation” movements
* The Nixon presidency and the Watergate conspiracy
While young activists were trying to register voters in the South in 1964, a small group of college students tried to help residents in a poor Chicago neighborhood. The activists were members of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Founded by white college students, SDS initially sought reform and grew by 1968 to have 350 chapters and between 60 and 100,000 members. Although efforts to mobilize the urban poor were largely unsuccessful, SDS members succeeded in breaking down isolation and strengthening community ties. But by 1967, SDS energies were being directed into protests against the widening war in Vietnam. The vignette illustrates how domestic energies were being channeled into the Vietnam War.

LBJ was determined to avoid Truman’s fate of being held responsible for losing Vietnam to Communism. Although pledging not to send American boys “to do what Asian boys ought to be doing,” he manipulated Congress into passing a resolution that was tantamount to a declaration of war. When bombing failed to halt North Vietnamese advances, Johnson sent large numbers of troops into Vietnam to prevent a Communist victory. Search-and-destroy missions combined with chemical warfare wreaked havoc on the people and the land. LBJ was committed to a war of attrition to wear out and destroy Vietnam. He kept his decisions from the American public and distorted accounts of military actions. News media increasingly questioned the official descriptions of the war. As casualties mounted, more Americans questions LBJ’s handling of the war.

People of all ages protested against the war, but young people stood out. Early campus protests at Berkeley centered on students’ rights to free speech. Many felt that the university had become a faceless bureaucratic machine. In 1967, San Francisco attracted thousands of young people for the “Summer of Love.” These young people were part of a generational revolt not directly related to the war. Through this movement, the increased use of drugs, and the anti-war movement were linked in many people’s minds. Events like the Woodstock festival spoke to many young Americans’ desires to create a new sense of community or counterculture. Concurrently, students organized protests that questioned the war effort and the university’s role in war-related research. Student strikes merged opposition to the war and other community issues. Public opinion polarized. Massive anti and pro-war rallies occurred. Nonviolent and violent protests erupted at draft boards. The cultural attitudes of protesters were even found among their equally young GI counterparts. Many soldiers grew increasingly bitter over government lies about their alleged victories and the inability of society to accept them once they returned home.

Spurred by books like Michael Harrington’s The Other America, American awareness of the problems of poverty greatly increased. LBJ called for “an unconditional war on poverty” and established the Office of Economic Opportunity to lead the struggle. Though the Job Corps failed, agencies focusing on education were more successful. The most innovative element were the Community Action Agencies (CAA) that sought to organize communities for social action. CAAs threatened to become a new political force that challenged those in power. Programs like the Legal Service Program and Head Start made real differences in the lives of the poor. But the Great Society did not commit itself to the redistribution of income, the root cause of poverty. Most social spending went to the non-poor through Medicare. A 1970 study concluded the war on poverty had barely scratched the surface.
The problems in America’s inner cities were especially pressing. White flight to the suburbs and the decline in higher-paying manufacturing jobs left cities as segregated centers of poverty and pollution with large minority populations. Urban black frustrations grew as they watched cities deteriorate around them. Over 100 riots broke out in northern cities between 1964 and 1968. Unlike previous riots, blacks destroyed property, generally after an incident with the police. A presidential commission blamed the rioting on white racism, poverty, and police brutality and recommended massive social reforms. But the cost of the Vietnam war and white backlash blocked their implementation.

1968 On January 30, 1968 the North Vietnamese launched the Tet offensive, shattering the credibility of American officials who had been predicting a quick victory. Despite the military victory, media reports showing extreme violence triggered antiwar protests. LBJ declared a bombing halt and announced he would not seek re-election. By 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. had broken with LBJ on Vietnam and had announced a massive Poor People’s Campaign. He was assassinated in Memphis. Rioting broke out in over 100 cities. Polarization split the Democratic Party. Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy both sought the anti-war vote, though Kennedy was able to reach to a broader following. He appeared unbeatable after winning the California primary, but was assassinated. Hubert Humphrey, LBJ’s loyal vice-president, won the nomination from a bitterly divided party. The Democratic convention was the scene of a major confrontation between protesters and police. All over the world young people took to the streets to demand changes.

THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY Generational divisions marked the civil rights movement as younger African Americans turned to Black Power. Groups like SNCC and the Black Panthers reflected the growing militancy and the calls for community autonomy. Racial pride grew during the late 1960s, affecting numerous segments of the African-American community. A renewed interest in African heritage and customs arose. During the early 1960s, many women began to demand equal rights. By the late sixties the influence of civil rights and New Left appeared as women identified their movement as one of liberation. The media focused on audacious acts like awarding a beauty-queen crown to a sheep. But in thousands of communities, women formed small consciousness-raising groups to examine the power dynamics in their own lives. A diverse and comprehensive women’s rights agenda emerged, though the movement remained a bastion of white middle-class women. The gay community had gained visibility during WWII and several openly gay organizations had emerged. The “Stonewall Riot” in New York City in 1968, in which patrons at a gay bar in New York City responded to police harassment, galvanized a “Gay Liberation Front.” Gradually changes in public opinion led to more accepting attitudes and a large minority of homosexuals “came out” of the closet.

Mexican Americans articulated a sense of Chicano pride and nationalism, initiating a series of protests. Throughout the Southwest Mexican Americans organized to push for land and social reforms as well as political power. Indian activists, led by the American Indian Movement, organized protests such as taking over Wounded Knee. An Indian Renaissance led to many new books about Indian life. Like Black Power and Latino activists, Asian Americans embraced a nationalism that emphasized ethnic pride and cultural survival.

THE NIXON PRESIDENCY In 1968, Richard Nixon, who pledged to roll back the Great
Society narrowly defeated Hubert Humphrey and George Wallace, who made an independent bid on a platform that was a conservative hate list. Nixon promised to bring “peace with honor” to Vietnam. But he and National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, believed that a military defeat would destroy United States global leadership. Nixon spoke of a phased withdrawal of American troops, but widened the war by invading Cambodia. The result was massive protests leading to four deaths at Kent State and two at Jackson State along with a Senate cut-off of funds. Nixon tried to hold on by invading Laos and by massive bombings. But nothing changed and Nixon accepted a peace settlement that led to the fall of South Vietnam. To everyone’s surprise, Nixon opened relations with the Communist government in China. Relations with the Soviet Union improved as he negotiated a grain deal and signed an arms control agreement. Nixon’s last diplomatic effort was to send Kissinger to the Middle East where he negotiated a temporary lull in the ongoing war. Despite his conservatism, Nixon supported a guaranteed income to replace welfare and imposed a wage and price freeze to hold down inflation. He appealed to conservatives in his opposition to school bussing and Supreme Court appointments. In 1969, American astronauts walked on the moon.

**WATERGATE** Nixon ordered illegal surveillance on many citizens, which when discovered, brought down his administration. At the heart of Nixon’s foreign policy was a wide range of secret interventions into Third World nations that propped up or destabilized regimes in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Nixon formed an inner circle to keep information from the public and to plug leaks. His “plumbers” broke into the office of Daniel Ellsberg’s psychiatrist in search of embarrassing information. In 1972, Democrats nominated George McGovern, representing the liberal wing of the party. The Nixon re-election committee ran a dirty-tricks campaign to confuse the Democrats, including a break-in at the Democratic headquarters at the Watergate apartment complex. The White House tried to cover up its involvement, but two reporters followed the evidence back to the Oval Office. Nixon fired the special prosecutor who sought secret tapes Nixon had made of White House conversations. Nixon finally resigned to avoid impeachment.

**CONCLUSION** Nixon’s resignation did not bring any new consensus but left an age of futility and cynicism.

**Lecture Suggestions**

1. Make the Vietnam lecture an attempt to explain why the United States lost the war. Many students believe what might be called the “Rambo” view of the war—we lost because we didn’t try hard enough—that there was so much protesting at home that the nation couldn’t concentrate on winning. Explain that in early 1968 there were virtually no protests. And yet despite having spent untold billions of dollars and sending in 500,000 men, the Vietcong and North Vietnamese could attack virtually any time and any place. The point of view expressed in the text emphasizes that the war was unwinnable—that the absence of any real legitimate support made the war unwinnable. Make the connection between the previously examined assumptions that led the United States into Vietnam and the realities that existed in the country.

2. Make the connection between the previously examined civil rights movement, the black power movement, and what the text calls the “politics of identity.” Explain how the civil
rights movement empowered people to think beyond what had been previously considered acceptable. Explain how groups other than African Americans came to see their own conditions through the model of civil rights.

3. Explain Watergate not as an aberration but as part of the way Richard Nixon conducted his political career. As the text emphasizes, Nixon saw himself surrounded not by an opposition with a legitimate message, but as enemies who were to be “gotten.” Once that mentality is established, things like Watergate and the abuse of power associated with the Nixon administration seem inevitable.

Discussion Questions

1. Why did Johnson get us so deeply into Vietnam? What could he have done to have avoided going deeper into the quagmire?

2. With which side do you identify—the protesters or the people who went to Vietnam? Why?

3. How would you characterize the government’s response to poverty in the Great Society? Was it too much, or too little?

4. Can you make a connection between the civil rights movement and the gay rights, Indian rights, etc. movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s?

5. Was Watergate as an aberration or do you see the entire episode as part of a larger pattern of abuse of power?

Out of Class Activity

Students today are surprisingly familiar with the popular music of the 1960s. Many college radio stations have good collections from the 1965–72 era. Many students have parents with good collections or have access in other ways. Assign teams of students to put together presentations of the music from the era 1965–72 that illustrate the generation gap and the counter culture.

If You’re Going to Read One Book on the Subject


Audio-Visual Aids

There is a tremendous amount of material available. Three good PBS series are:

“Making Sense of the 60s” A 6-hour series that looks at the range of youth rebellions and shows why they developed. (1991)
“Eyes on the Prize—II” An 8-hour continuation of the series mentioned in Chapter Twenty-Eight. It examines what happens to the civil rights movement once it hits the north.

“Vietnam: A Television History” A 13 part series that covers the entire war.