The battle of Ap Bac demonstrated that ARVN soldiers, even when they took the offensive with all the material odds in their favor, could not be counted on to defeat their Communist-led countrymen and -women. It was the Viet Cong who kept their heads in the thick of battle, who had the motivation to fight courageously and to endure great punishment. If the men who ran the U.S. war effort hoped to defeat the “raggedy-ass little bastards,” they would eventually have to send American troops to do the job.

SPRING: ALABAMA

Meanwhile, in the heart of the American South, a different kind of insurgent force was preparing to go on the offensive. In 1963 Birmingham was the largest city in Alabama—and, in racial reputation, the meanest. Northern corporations held the economic whip hand in what was the steelmaking capital of the South. The local government had long been the property of tough white politicians. They erected and maintained an iron barrier against the hopes of black citizens, who numbered 40 percent of the population, for equal access to good jobs, housing, and commerce. Birmingham’s most prominent office-holder was Eugene “Bull” Connor, the commissioner of public safety, who ran the all-white police force and the fire department. Connor firmly believed that the civil rights movement was a Communist plot and that stern, even brutal measures were needed to turn back the threat it posed to the traditional racial order.

Bull Connor and his men did little to stop white vigilantes, some of whom belonged to the Ku Klux Klan, from carrying on a terror campaign against local blacks who dared transgress the color line. Birmingham bombers frequently targeted African Americans who bought property in traditionally white neighborhoods; since 1947, more than 50 explosions had torn into black homes, businesses, and churches—far more than in any other southern city. After three churches identified with civil rights activism were bombed in January alone, Connor told the press, “Negroes did it.” After all a black worshiper had sounded an alarm after finding a burning fuse, and eyewitnesses “saw Negroes running from the churches.”

Such comments from the official guardian of “public safety” embarrassed the business elite of Birmingham, known as the “Big Mules,” who were ever mindful of their city’s image up north. Early in 1963, large employers had endorsed a city council form of government that would throw Bull Connor out of his job. But, for the moment, Connor was the law in Birmingham; and, besides the Ku Klux Klan, he had a powerful political ally: George C. Wallace, the newly elected governor of Alabama.

Wallace had begun his political career in the 1940s as something of a southern liberal. He supported higher taxes on corporations and did not at
first indulge in the vicious race baiting that had been a staple of Deep South politics since the disenfranchisement of blacks at the turn of the century. After the Supreme Court’s 1954 Brown ruling, however, Wallace resolved never again to be “soft on the nigger question.” In 1962, he won the race for governor by stoking the fear and anger of his fellow whites about the potential horrors of “race-mixing”—the integration of schools and workplaces. And on January 14, his inaugural address made Wallace the best-known defender of white supremacy in America. “In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth,” he announced, “I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny. And I say, segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!”

Black freedom activists saw such ferocity as a challenge—and an opportunity. A major civil rights campaign in Birmingham could compel Bull Connor and his allies to respond with all the brutality of which they were capable. In so doing, it could force white people throughout the nation to confront the moral terms of the struggle. “[Connor] was a perfect adversary,” recalled Wyatt Walker, a top aide to Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. “He believed that he would be the state’s most popular politician if he treated the black violently, bloodily, and sternly. We knew that the psyche of the white redneck was such that he would inevitably do something to help our cause.”

Early in 1963, Walker mapped out the strategy he dubbed “Project C”—for confrontation. The demands on city authorities were straightforward: desegregate the economic life of Birmingham—its restaurants, hotels, public toilets, and the unwritten policy of hiring blacks for menial jobs only. To press its demands, the SCLC would rely on parishioners from sympathetic black churches to fill Birmingham’s streets and, if necessary, its jail cells. They would start with small sit-ins and a boycott of downtown businesses and end with mass marches designed to draw national attention. Walker and his fellow activists hoped the protests would exacerbate the split between the “Big Mules” and the ordinary whites Bull Connor represented. They also needed to put black freedom high on the national agenda again, and they hoped the campaign would rejuvenate their ranks and their spirits.

But there were no illusions about the human cost: during these peaceful demonstrations, black blood was going to flow. In January Dr. King told an SCLC leadership meeting, “I have to tell you that in my judgment, some of the people sitting here today will not come back alive from this campaign.”

Despite such forebodings, the Birmingham protests began quietly in early April. Bull Connor had just been defeated in a race for mayor, and this dissuaded some black residents from risking their health and livelihood on a picket line. The police did arrest scores of demonstrators who left the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and marched into downtown Birmingham. But, on Connor’s orders, they kept their nightsticks by their sides and their attack dogs in their
kennels. Despite the boycott, thousands of blacks were still shopping in the big department stores where none could get a job. When a state court enjoined the SCLC from further actions, King defied the ruling and went to jail—on Good Friday. He was released on Easter Sunday, frowning that the expected resurrection of the black movement had not yet occurred. “Wyatt, you’ve got to find some way to make Bull Connor tip his hand,” he told Walker.14

Within days, SCLC leaders decided on a new tactic: they would mobilize schoolchildren. Rev. James Bevel, a King aide, offered a “simple formula: any child old enough to belong to a church should be eligible to march to jail.”15 For Baptists, that meant the minimum age of qualification for protest was 6. So on May 2, a month after the Birmingham campaign began, a thousand children, most of them high school students, filed out of the big stone church on 16th Street. Singing “We Shall Overcome,” they moved toward downtown, at first overwhelming Connor’s police with the joyful intensity of the duty they were performing. “Hurry up Lucille,” cried one young protester to a friend, “If you stay behind, you won’t get arrested with our group.”16

The new departure convinced Connor that intimidation would be necessary after all. The next day, when hundreds of children again took to the streets, city firemen turned on high-pressure hoses to drive them off. German shepherds from police K-9 squads tore into their flesh. That night, television viewers all across the nation saw the white South at its worst.

Images of young black people, neatly dressed, set upon by fierce dogs and pinned to the ground by jets of water strong enough to strip bark from trees provoked northern outrage. Bull Connor was, indeed, the best “organizer” the black freedom movement had ever had. After that day in May, it was inevitable that President Kennedy would propose and that Congress would pass a major civil rights bill. And several weeks later, a committee of the “Big Mules” signed a desegregation agreement with the SCLC.

Nonviolent “direct action” could not, however, address the deeper sources of racial inequality. In an eloquent letter he wrote in jail, Martin Luther King, Jr. told white clergymen who had advised him to call off his “unwise and untimely” demonstrations:

> We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jet-like speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter... There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, that you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.17

Most of the children who marched came from churchgoing families with steady incomes. But when they were attacked, hundreds of poorer black men and women made clear that the era of turning the other cheek was over. They hurled rocks, bottles, and epithets at the police, confronted white pedestrians
on downtown sidewalks, and burned down some white-owned businesses. Meanwhile, the Imperial Wizard of the KKK, Robert Shelton, bristled that the SCLC “has not gained one thing in Birmingham, because the white people are not going to tolerate the meddlesome, conniving, manipulating moves of these professional businessmen.”

Men of Shelton’s ilk continued to bomb black churches, political groups, and homes—including that of Rev. A. D. King, brother of the SCLC leader. One Sunday that September, a group of Klansman placed dynamite next to the basement of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. The explosion killed four black girls—ages 11 to 14—dressed in their choir robes. It was going to take much more than one victorious campaign to dismantle the structures of white supremacy built and rebuilt during the years since the first African slaves had disembarked at Jamestown, Virginia, one morning in 1619.

George Wallace soon gave defiant whites an opportunity to rail at their enemies, in the federal government as well as the civil rights movement. During his 1962 campaign for governor, Wallace had promised to “stand in the schoolhouse door” if courts ordered the integration of his alma mater, the University of Alabama. The following June, he got his chance. Two aspiring black students, Vivian Malone and James Hood, were scheduled to register in June for the summer session at the Tuscaloosa campus. Malone wanted to major in accounting; Hood favored clinical psychology. For several weeks, U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy and Nicholas Katzenbach, his deputy, tried to persuade Wallace to avoid a confrontation and the potential for more violence. The governor agreed to warn his angry white supporters to stay away from the campus. But he insisted on making a stand.

On the morning of June 11, Wallace stood at a podium placed in front of the auditorium where registration was under way. A thicket of journalists with microphones and cameras stood ready to record anything that transpired on this muggy, 95 degree day. An irritated Katzenbach got out of his car, strode up to the podium, and asked Wallace “for unequivocal assurance that you or anyone under your control will not bar these students . . . who, after all, merely want an education in the great University.” In response, the governor, reading a four-page statement, vowed, “There can be no submission to the theory that the central government is anything but a servant of the people . . . [I] do hereby denounce and forbid this illegal and unwarranted action.” Then he retreated inside the air-conditioned auditorium and let Malone and Hood register, accompanied by federal officials.

On the surface and in the eyes of the Kennedy administration, the little ceremony was an awkward fig leaf for Wallace’s surrender. But, in reality, it had confirmed their antagonist’s reputation, in the eyes of many whites, as a courageous champion of the common man beset by a meddling government.

Wallace’s defiant posture, cleft chin and back straight, before the taller Katzenbach made him seem a plebeian descendant of Confederate heroes, doing battle again with the federal dragon. Slaying the beast might be impossi-
ble, but the pugnacious governor had set the terms for future combat. George Wallace had converted his failure to stop two black students from attending a public university into a potent symbol of protest against a federal government toward which many white Americans felt uneasy. “Wallacism is bigger than Wallace,” Martin Luther King, Jr. told an interviewer soon after the drama in Tuscaloosa, “...I am not sure that he believes all the poison he preaches, but he is artful enough to convince others that he does.”

On the night of June 11, John Kennedy told the nation in a televised address that the time had finally come “to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated.” A full century after the Emancipation Proclamation, black men and women were still not truly free. “We preach freedom around the world, and we mean it,” said the president, referring to the Cold War which had always been his main concern. “But are we to say to the world—and much more importantly, to each other—that this is the land of the free, except for Negroes, that we have no second-class citizens, except Negroes, that we have no caste system, no ghettos, no master race, except with respect to Negroes?” Then he outlined the most far-reaching civil rights law in the nation’s history.

It was, agreed black leaders at the time and most historians since, John Kennedy’s finest hour. But just after midnight, the white resistance claimed another victim. From a vacant lot in Jackson, Mississippi, Byron de la Beckwith, a fertilizer salesman with a maniacal hatred of blacks, shot a bullet into the back of Medgar Evers, militant leader of the Mississippi NAACP. An all-white jury found Beckwith not guilty. Later, he boasted to a KKK meeting, “Killing that nigger gave me no more inner discomfort than our wives endure when they give birth to our children. We ask them to do that for us. We should do just as much.”
It would be comforting to think that hostility to civil rights in the 1960s was restricted to diehard southern racists like Beckwith. The reality is more complicated. Even as President John Kennedy and his brother reached out politically to Martin Luther King, Jr., and proposed pathbreaking civil rights legislation, they continued to view the movement King led with suspicions left over from the 1950s.

By 1963, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director J. Edgar Hoover was providing the attorney general with a steady stream of derogatory reports about King, accusing him of falling under the influence of alleged Communist advisers. Hoover's antagonism to King reflected both ideological and racial preoccupations; Hoover preserved the FBI as a lily-white organization, and would privately refer to Martin Luther King as a "burrhead." In the summer of 1963, he successfully pressured Robert Kennedy into authorizing wiretaps on some of King's close political associates; in October 1963, the taps, with Kennedy's approval, would be extended to King's own telephones, both in his office and his home. In addition, Hoover's men began to put listening devices into King's hotel rooms when the civil rights leader was traveling.

Recording evidence of King's marital infidelities on the road, the FBI put together a "sex tape" of such episodes and in 1964, mailed it to King's home, where his wife Coretta Scott King discovered it and played it. The tape was accompanied by a crude anonymous letter, crafted by FBI agents as if it had come from a disillusioned black supporter, and implying that King could only avoid public exposure as an adulterer by killing himself.

This seamy FBI campaign against King was launched under the banner of a secret program known as COINTELPRO (or "counterintelligence program"), launched in the 1950s against the Communist Party and other radical groups, and intended to spread dissension and confusion in their ranks. Robert Kennedy, according to his friends, would later be conscience-stricken about his role in authorizing FBI harassment of King. He might have been more willing to stand up to the FBI director, had it not been for the fact that Hoover was in a position to reveal politically damaging information about John F. Kennedy's many extramarital affairs. Behind-the-scenes decision-making in the Kennedy White House seemed, on occasion, to be scripted by a team divided between the classical playwrights of Greek antiquity and contemporary writers of television soap operas.23

**SUMMER: YOU'VE REALLY GOT A HOLD ON ME**

On June 23 the streets of downtown Detroit filled with purpose. Some 200,000 people, black and white, marched to protest the killing of Medgar Evers and to show that the civil rights movement was flourishing in the industrial North.
The leading organizer of the march was the Reverend C. L. Franklin, a charismatic Baptist minister whose radio program of sermons and gospel music was heard in black homes all over the nation. Aretha, the minister's teenage daughter, sometimes lent her powerful voice to the broadcasts. The main speaker at the "Great March to Freedom" was Martin Luther King, Jr. "I have a dream this afternoon," he told the throng, "that the brotherhood of man will become a reality." Within weeks, a local record company named Motown released his speech as the centerpiece of an album commemorating the day.24

In 1963, popular music and the civil rights movement were often intertwined, each stimulating the growth and creativity of the other. One of the best-selling singles that year was "Blowin' in the Wind," a new folk song with lines like "How many years can some people exist before they're allowed to be free?" that evoked the demands of the black insurgency—although both its author, Bob Dylan, and the artists who recorded it—Peter, Paul, and Mary—were white. But rock and roll dominated the air waves and represented a break with the musical past.

When it emerged in the 1950s, rock frightened many older Americans, precisely because it refused to honor the separation between a mainstream pop style—designated as "white"—and the ghettoized category of "race" records. Rock shouted a joy of the sexy and the unpredictable; it also invited everyone to dance. In 1955 some country-and-western musicians blasted Elvis Presley, who was then only 20, as a "white nigger" because he loved to play black spirituals and blues and moved on stage with sensual abandon—eliciting a cascade of passionate screams from female fans. To established pop singers, the new wave appeared barbaric. "Rock 'n' roll smells phony and false," snapped Frank Sinatra at a congressional hearing in 1957. "It is sung, played, and written for the most part by cretinous goons ... the most brutal, ugly, desperate, vicious form of expression it has been my misfortune to hear."22

By 1963, such opinions were rarely heard, at least in public. Ever practical, the recording industry quickly learned to appreciate the market value of sounds that beguiled tens of millions of young people with billions of dollars to spend. Older white stars soon gave up the fight as well, consoling themselves with the knowledge that many Americans still adored their music. In January 1961 Frank Sinatra sang at the inaugural gala of his good friend, John F. Kennedy. But rock 'n' roll was here to stay.

Without conscious intention, young rock artists were subverting cultural and racial assumptions that Americans carried around in their heads. In 1963, hearing Smokey Robinson's love song "You've Really Got a Hold on Me" on the radio struck a white teenager from the Detroit area with the force of prophecy. "Before it was through," Dave Marsh wrote later, when he'd become a noted rock critic, "my world had changed, caught up in the magic of a sound which revealed to me ... the falsity of the racism within which I'd
been raised. Maybe it was just hearing the humanity in Smokey Robinson’s voice, and finally putting it together with the knowledge that he was a black man.”

The company that produced “You’ve Really Got a Hold on Me” was distinctive in its own right. In 1963, only four years after its founding, Motown was already the most successful black-owned record company in U.S. history. Its 38-year-old president, Berry Gordy, Jr., had become a celebrity, a model for other black executives to follow. National hits by such artists as Martha and the Vandellas, Little Stevie Wonder, and Marvin Gaye, as well as Smokey Robinson and his group, the Miracles, rolled out of the firm’s modest headquarters on West Grand Boulevard in the heart of black Detroit.

“Rolled” was a word Gordy himself might have used. Part of the inspiration to start Motown came from an unlikely source—a Ford factory where, as an assembly line worker, Gordy had fastened chrome and nailed upholstery. “At the plant cars started out as just a frame, pulled along on conveyor belts until they emerged at the end of the line [as] brand spanking new cars,” Gordy recalled. “I wanted the same concept for my company... a place where a kid off the street could walk in one door, be an unknown and come out another a recording artist— a star.”

On the front of the Motown building, Gordy placed a huge sign reading “Hitsville, U.S.A.” Inside, he assembled a team of crack songwriters, studio musicians, choreographers, and wily executives (including vice president Smokey Robinson). They instructed talented youngsters how to sing and perform for other kids of all races. The Motown way was slick and methodical: aspiring stars took dance lessons from a tap artist and smoothed the rough edges of their ghetto upbringing with lessons in elegant table manners, vocabulary, and even the proper way to hold a cigarette. To promote his new productions, Gordy sent his newly refined talent on the road as the Motortown Revue. But all the grace in the world could not cool the rage of the white South. After performing before an integrated audience in Birmingham, troupe members found their bus pockmarked with bullet holes.

Motown became renowned for its tight orchestrations and catchy lyrics. The music also challenged listeners, offering something new and even revelatory, at the same time as it made them want to move their hips. “Heat Wave,” sung by Martha and the Vandellas, made it to #4 on the pop music charts in the summer of 1963. Accompanied by the driving, lilting beat of a baritone saxophone and an electric organ, lead singer Martha Reeves (who had been “discovered” among Motown’s corps of secretaries) asked, “Has high blood pressure got a hold on me or is this the way love’s supposed to be?” Her response: “Can’t explain it, don’t understand it, ain’t never felt like this before.” Nearly every teenager and young adult could “second that emotion,” as Smokey Robinson put it in one of his best songs.
Little Stevie Wonder's "Fingertips, Part 2" held down the #1 spot in the nation for three weeks that year. Wonder was then only 12 years old, hence the diminutive nickname. Blind since birth, the boy christened Stevland Morris was indeed a musical wunderkind. He had signed a contract with Motown when he was only 8. By then, he was already active in his church choir and performing on a wide range of instruments.

Wonder's first big hit, however, was not spiritual. Recorded in a Chicago theater before an enthusiastic audience, "Fingertips, Part 2" showed off his virtuosity and revealed that the Motown way, slick as it was, still allowed for improvisation. Little Stevie moved between harmonica and organ, singing a few lines composed on the spot. The turbulent piece ended abruptly, with a drummer's smash. In the background, one can hear a confused bass guitarist asking, "What key? What key?" Like the best of rock music, "Fingertips, Part 2" defied convention, mingling spontaneity and smooth production values—and refused to take itself too seriously.
Meanwhile, Bob Dylan was busy creating his own brand of popular art in Greenwich Village—New York City’s cradle of avant-garde artists with a leftist bent since early in the century. Folk music had been Dylan’s escape from the staid provinciality of his hometown of Hibbing, located deep in the Iron Belt of northern Minnesota. The middle-class Jewish boy born Robert Allen Zimmerman remade himself in the image of the sensitive outlaw limned by such popular culture heroes as Elvis Presley, country singer Hank Williams, actor James Dean, and the ’50s rhythm-and-blues artist Little Richard. He renamed himself after both the hard-drinking Welsh poet Dylan Thomas and Matt Dillon, the manly protagonist of a popular TV western series. No one, he hoped, would suspect anyone named Dylan of being either soft or Jewish. Postwar society bred legions of white kids longing, in similar ways, to reject and transcend their comfortable backgrounds. But no other wrote or sang with such painful eloquence.

The young artist had come to New York to meet Woody Guthrie, another paragon of authenticity. In the 1930s and 1940s, Guthrie became an emblem of exuberant rebellion. He left the Oklahoma Dust Bowl to ride the rails, write about migrant workers and union maids, and denounce stuffed shirts and hypocrites wherever he found them. Few who heard his best-known song, “This Land Is Your Land,” knew that he was a member of the Communist Party. When Dylan met him, Guthrie was trapped in a hospital bed, slowly dying of a congenital nerve disease. But he was charmed by his 20-year-old admirer who sat by the bed, playing his guitar and singing both traditional folk tunes and his own protest lyrics.

Dylan’s first album, issued in the spring of 1962, paid homage to the Guthrie tradition. Produced by the veteran folklorist John Hammond, it was filled with blues standards from the South like “Gospel Plow” and “See That My Grave is Kept Clean”—although Dylan performed them with a gleeful ferocity of grunts, yelps, and chuckles that owed more to Elvis than to veteran black bluesmen like Blind Lemon Jefferson or Son House. One of the two original compositions on the album was “Song to Woody,” which ends with the lines:

I’m a-leavin’ tomorrow, but I could leave today,
Somewhere down the road someday.
The very last thing that I’d want to do
Is to say I’ve been hittin’ some hard travellin’ too.29

Indeed, Dylan would soon leave the emulation behind. His second album, *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, released in May of 1963, contained almost no songs but his own. Some were clearly motivated by political outrage: particularly “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “Oxford Town” (about Mississippi whites who rioted to stop integration of the state university), and “Masters of War,” an
icle-sharp polemic against generals, bomb makers, and nuclear strategists, whom the writer cannot wait to see entombed.

But equally vital were his lyrics, both bitter and wistful, about ex-lovers and ex-friends who wouldn't give up their independence or moderate their ego. Songs like "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" and "Bob Dylan's Dream" revealed a performer with a self-knowledge rare for someone who had just entered adulthood. Influenced by such modern poets as Thomas and Rimbaud, Dylan created surreal, often brutal images of a world out of joint. In one song, a boy reports back from a landscape apparently devastated by nuclear weapons: "I saw a newborn baby with wild wolves all around it, I saw a highway of diamonds with nobody on it, I saw a black branch with blood that kept drippin', I saw a room full of men with their hammers a-bleedin'...")

By the end of the summer, Freewheelin' had sold 100,000 copies; Bob Dylan was a star. What is more, he was fast becoming a bigger culture hero than the folksingers he had idolized while conjuring himself out of the Iron Range. Young male and female admirers alike copied Dylan's signature outfit of unpressed jeans, motorcycle jacket and boots, and workman's cap over bushy
long hair. Budding bohemians from the suburbs marveled at his poetic intensity and ironic manner. Joan Baez, fellow folksinger and Dylan's sometime girlfriend, appealed to many of the same fans. Her long straight hair, lack of makeup, and unaffected vocal style seemed to announce that she aimed to please nobody but herself. Dylan, however, lived more on the edge. "My songs speak for me," he wrote to a friend in the early '60s, "I write them in the confinement of my own mind. If I didn't write I think I'd go insane."  

Through 1963, Dylan kept composing about and singing for the poor and the underdog—although his appetite for "message songs" was fast diminishing. In July, he sang at a SNCC rally for voting rights in Greenwood, Mississippi. The following month, with group of other folk musicians, he performed at the huge demonstration for Jobs and Freedom in Washington, D.C., where Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a different—and soon famous—version of the "I Have a Dream Speech," which Motown had recorded earlier in Detroit.

The outpouring on August 28 of a quarter-million protestors of all races now seems evidence that King's nonviolent strategy was bearing fruit. But, at the time, President Kennedy and his advisors feared the March on Washington would bring riot and bloodshed to the streets of the capital city. The worried administration assembled what may have been "the biggest peacetime military buildup in American history." Held in readiness was a force of close to 20,000 troops and 30 helicopters, and, to discourage looting, a policeman or National Guardsman at each corner near the Mall.

But the marchers stayed peaceful, and not one of them got arrested. The huge crowd was in a hopeful mood; perhaps the nation had finally begun to cleanse itself of racism. Bob Dylan was characteristically dubious. Near the end of the day, he looked over toward the Capitol and grumbled, "Think they're listening? No they ain't listening at all."  

**FALL: SAIGON AND DALLAS**

Friday, November 1, was a holiday in Saigon. Most Vietnamese were Buddhists and thus did not celebrate All Saints Day, as the nation's former French colonizers had done. But the leaders of South Vietnam were devout Catholics and set the official calendar. That morning, President Ngo Dinh Diem held a short meeting with the U.S. ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, a patrician Republican who had assumed the post in August. "Tell President Kennedy that I take all his suggestions very seriously and wish to carry them out but it is a question of timing," Diem told the stern diplomat who towered over him.

Since the past winter's humiliation at Ap Bac, American policymakers had become increasingly frustrated with the way Diem was running his country. Not only did he squander millions of dollars of aid without aggressively chal-
lenging the enemy to battle, but he also rebuffed calls to hold free elections and ordered troops to crush the regime's peaceful, non-Communist opponents, which only kindled a larger movement to replace him. Diem's soldiers killed Buddhist demonstrators for displaying traditional flags on Buddha's birthday, broke into temples and arrested dissident bonzes (monks), and violently shut down the nation's universities. The initiators of this tough, politically obtuse policy were the president's younger brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, who commanded the secret police, and his wife, Madame Nhu. Both were infamous for their sadism. When, in a grisly protest, the bonze Quang Duc committed suicide by dousing himself with gasoline, Madame Nhu chortled about "Buddhist barbecues" and offered to buy fuel for anyone who chose to follow.

In the summer, dozens of young military officers began planning a coup d'état under the leadership of General Duong Van Minh ("Big Minh"), a popular figure among rank-and-file soldiers. The plotters were anxious for U.S. support; without American backing, any new government would surely fail. But General Harkins preferred to keep bargaining with Diem, the devil he knew, and top officials in Washington, including President Kennedy, sharply criticized the South Vietnamese leader. Yet they could not resolve to support a coup.

Lodge, however, had made up his mind only days after arriving in Saigon. On August 29, he cabled his superiors, "We are launched on a course from which there is no respectable turning back: the overthrow of the Diem government... there is no possibility, in my view, that the war can be won under a Diem administration." For the next two months, Diem continued to hold regular, cordial meetings with the diplomat who was firmly committed to his political demise. By the end of October, U.S. policymakers had arrived at the same conclusion.

The coup began on November 1, soon after Lodge departed the presidential palace for his midday nap. Rebel troops moved into the capital and, under the command of Colonel Nguyen Van Thieu, advanced toward Diem's stronghold. At 4:30 p.m., Diem telephoned Lodge, demanding to know, "What is the attitude of the United States?" Lodge lied, disdainfully: "I do not feel well enough informed to be able to tell you..." Also it is 4:30 A.M. in Washington and the U.S. government cannot possibly have a view." Diem and his brother soon fled the palace to take refuge in the Chinese quarter of Cholon. When the sun rose the next morning, Thieu's forces had finished blasting their way into the seat of power.

Diem and Nhu expected to become exiles, living perhaps on some French-speaking island on the largesse of their former American patrons. But the U.S. embassy failed to dispatch a plane for them. And the most vengeful of the military plotters had a different idea. "To kill weeds, you must pull them up at the roots," vowed one rebel officer. About an hour after the Ngo brothers voluntarily surrendered to coup leaders on the morning of November 2,
two experienced assassins shot and stabbed them to death. "A remarkably
able performance in all respects," Lodge cabled the State Department the
next day.

John Kennedy did not agree. "A look of shock and dismay" crossed his
face, remembered Maxwell Taylor, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.
Days later, the president was still distressed about the affair. To a friend who
called Diem and Nhu "tyrants," he responded, "No, they were in a difficult
position. They did the best they could for their country."36

Later that month, the president traveled to Texas to heal a more benign
sort of civil conflict. Democrats in the huge and swiftly growing state were
split into two mutually suspicious factions. One, led by Governor John Con-
nally, championed the needs of oil barons and the values of white farmers;
its members tended to view civil rights bills and organized labor as obnoxious
northern imports. The other camp of Democrats, led by Senator Ralph
Yarborough, sought to renew the programs and spirit of the New Deal. The
liberals represented embattled unionists, the interracial poor, and intellectu-
als. Kennedy had won Texas by only 46,000 votes in 1960, and if the Repub-
licans nominated a conservative in 1964, a divided party would imperil
his chances there.

On the morning of November 22, the president and his wife, Jacqueline,
flew into Dallas. They were prepared for a cool, if not unfriendly, reception.
The city, which had more than doubled in population since 1940, usually
voted Republican, and local right-wing activists were aggressive both in word
and deed. A month earlier, UN ambassador (and former presidential can-
didate) Adlai Stevenson had endured heckling, spittle, and a blow from an
angry picketer. On November 22, as the president dressed for the day, he glanced
at a full-page ad in the Dallas Morning News which demanded he answer such
questions as "WHY have you approved the sale of wheat and corn to our en-
emies when . . . Communist soldiers are daily wounding and/or killing Amer-
ican soldiers in Vietnam?" and "WHY have you ordered or permitted your
brother Bobby [the attorney general] . . . to go soft on Communists, fellow-
travelers, and ultra-leftists in America, while permitting him to persecute loyal
Americans?"37

By noon, no hostility was evident as the Kennedy motorcade glided slowly
through downtown Dallas on the way to a lunch with businessmen. Newspa-
pers had printed a map of the route the president and his party would take,
and hundreds of thousands of people had left work or school to take a look.
Seated in the back seat of an open Lincoln limousine behind Governor Con-
nally and his wife, Nellie, the president and first lady were delighted with
the large, friendly crowds. As the motorcade entered Dealey Plaza (named
for the first publisher of the Morning News), Nellie Connally turned around
and beamed, "Mr. President, you can't say that Dallas doesn't love you." He
responded, "No, you certainly can't."38
Then, a few seconds after 12:30, three rifle shots tore all comfort to shreds. The first bullet missed the limousine and hit a curb nearby, spraying fragments on several spectators. The second struck the president in the back of the neck, exited through his throat, and then hit Governor Connally in the shoulder. The third blasted the president's skull from behind, blowing his head apart and splattering the first lady with blood and brain tissue. Connally survived and had a long political career, the last segment of it as a Republican. But for John Kennedy, the frenzied rush to the hospital was pointless. He had died, the fourth U.S. president to be assassinated but the first to be murdered in full view of thousands of his fellow citizens. Minutes later, the number of spectators expanded to include the entire nation and much of the world.

Newscasters in the United States talked about and showed pictures of little else until the president's funeral ended four days later. Certain images from those days became instantly famous, a collective album through which the assassination will long be remembered: Johnson grimly taking the oath of office as Jacqueline Kennedy stands beside him in shock, her pink suit soaked in gore; 3-year-old John Kennedy, Jr., in knee pants, saluting his father's casket; the riderless black horse that walked in the funeral procession, with empty black boots reversed in the stirrups; people of all races weeping openly and freely. Before the year was over, the dead president's name was affixed to countless schools, streets, buildings, New York City's largest airport, and the cape in Florida where scientists and astronauts were working to beat the Soviets to the moon.

At the time, the esteemed historian Bruce Catton struggled to sum up the meaning of this torrent of grief. "What John F. Kennedy left us was most of all an attitude. To put it in the simplest terms, he looked ahead. He knew no more than anyone else what the future was going to be like, but he did know that that was where we ought to be looking... President Kennedy came to symbolize that moment of change, not because he caused it but because he fitted into it; not because of what he did but simply because of what he was." Swiftly and without hindsight, a shrewd politician whose main preoccupation in office had been winning the Cold War was transmuted into an icon of strength and idealism, the selfless young reformer who died for all Americans.

The end of Kennedy's life also marked the beginning of one of the most furious—and longest-lived—controversies in American history. For over four decades, who killed Kennedy and why are questions that retain their power to haunt and fascinate.

Part of the reason is that Lee Harvey Oswald, who was quickly arrested and charged with the murder, was himself assassinated two days later by a strip-club owner named Jack Ruby, who was friendly with the Dallas police. Part is due to Oswald's earlier defection to and return from the Soviet Union
and his subsequent passionate support of the Cuban revolution. Part can be blamed on a "rush to judgment" by the Warren Commission, which the new president, Lyndon Johnson, appointed to investigate the killings. The commission published its final report in September 1964, only 10 months after the events in Dallas. Even its defenders later acknowledged that President Johnson, the Kennedy family, and the FBI pressured the panel of jurists and politicians to confirm that both Oswald and Ruby had acted alone and lacked any motivation other than personal rage. The fact that Johnson expanded U.S. troop strength and firepower in Vietnam, with disastrous conclusions, also led to speculation that his beloved predecessor was killed because he had begun to doubt the wisdom of the war.

Hundreds of books, several of which were best sellers, bear witness to the broad, fervent desire to discover that some group of conspirators killed the president. The suspects include nearly every locus, real or imagined, of national power in the mid-60s: the CIA, the Mafia, the military-industrial complex, corrupt leaders of the Teamsters' Union (especially Jimmy Hoffa),
wealthy Cuban exiles, oil magnates, and Lyndon Johnson himself. Cuban dictator Fidel Castro and the rulers of the USSR are also favorite culprits. Each of the theories neglects or diligently minimizes details that might refute it. But, together, they have persuaded most Americans. In a 2003 poll, 70 percent of the public believed there was some kind of plot to kill the president.

Such pervasive suspicions are one measure of how little confidence Americans, since the assassination, have had in the goodwill of the authorities, elected and self-anointed, who shape their lives. The federal government, in particular, came to seem both mendacious and fragile. As the chief executives who followed Kennedy lied and blundered from crisis to crisis, cynicism, while morally regrettable, became a form of self-defense. If "they" could kill a president, anything was possible. Speak truth to the powers that be or, at least, give them hell. In a Dallas hospital, minutes after doctors confirmed the death of her husband, Jacqueline Kennedy was asked if she’d like to wash and change her clothes. "No," she replied. "I want them to see what they have done."
For four days in November 1963 the country virtually shut down, as millions of Americans watched the events of that long weekend unfold on their television screens. From Dallas came endless reports on the assassination itself, on the nature of the president's fatal wounds, of the arrest and killing of Lee Harvey Oswald. From Washington came coverage of the new president's arrival at Andrews Air Force Base after having been sworn in on Air Force One on the somber return flight from Dallas, of his proclamation of a day of national mourning for the slain president, of Kennedy's lying in state in the Capitol rotunda, and then on Monday, November 25, of the funeral procession with the riderless horse, followed by the burial ceremony in Arlington National Cemetery.

Two days later the country watched again on television as a grim-faced Lyndon Baines Johnson delivered his first presidential address to a joint session of the Congress of the United States. Less than three years earlier, in his own inaugural address, John Kennedy had declared, "Let us begin." Now President Johnson added, humbly, "Let us continue."  

But continue what? According to public opinion polls taken days after the assassination, 70 percent of Americans were unsure how the country could "carry on without" Kennedy. Even in the White House, Johnson couldn't escape the feeling of being an interloper. It wasn't until February that the White House staff got around to taking down the pictures of the late president from their offices and replacing them with pictures of his successor.

It was bad enough that Kennedy had been murdered in Johnson's home state, tarring the new president by association with his state's virulent strain of political extremism. What Johnson also had to be aware of was that a small but influential circle of liberal insiders in his own party were meeting pri-
vately to discuss whether they could deny him the nomination at next summer's Democratic national convention. Johnson was determined to head off any potential movement to anoint Attorney General Robert Kennedy heir-apparent to his martyred brother.5

Johnson understood that he had to move swiftly to reassure the country as a whole, and the Democratic party in particular, that he was indeed a legitimate successor to John Kennedy. The best way to do so would be to show that he could be more successful than Kennedy himself in pushing "Kennedy programs" through Congress. Meeting with Walter Heller, chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, shortly after taking office, Johnson asked him to "tell your friends—Arthur Schlesinger, Galbraith, and other liberals" that he had not the slightest intention of going back to the conservative policies of the 1950s. "To tell the truth," Johnson added, "John F. Kennedy was a little too conservative to suit my taste."6

The thirty-sixth president of the United States was born in 1908 in the hill country of central Texas, a brush-strewn highland whose soil had been ruined by too many generations of small farmers striving to get rich, or just get by, growing cotton. Lyndon Baines Johnson was the eldest of five children born to Sam and Rebekah Johnson. Although Johnson would later exaggerate his family's poverty for political purposes, they certainly lived close to the margin. Sam Johnson was a landowner and a six-term member of the Texas state legislature. But unlike many of his fellow lawmakers, he scorned the bribes that flowed freely from Texas business lobbyists eager to purchase legislative favors. A Democrat of populist sympathies, Sam Johnson believed that government should serve the interests of ordinary men, not the wealthy and big corporations. Young Lyndon admired the way his father stuck to his principles; he also couldn't help but notice that such idealism could be costly. After a disastrous collapse of cotton prices following the First World War, Sam Johnson wound up working on a road crew on some of the same state highways he had helped bring to his district.7

Lyndon Johnson was keenly aware of the differences between his own background and the "Harvards" in John Kennedy's administration. No one had handed him an Ivy League education, or anything else in life. He had worked his way through Southwest Texas State College in San Marcos (including a stint teaching poor Mexican-American children in a dusty border town, an experience that he would often refer back to), graduating in 1930. Then, after another year of teaching, he secured a position in Washington, D.C., as secretary to a Texas congressman. His public life had begun.

Johnson was not a handsome man; his manners were crude; he could be overbearing and a bully. But he was also intelligent, with a prodigious memory and, most importantly, a gift of keen political perception. He understood how to make use of the ambitions and anxieties of the people around him to
accomplish his own aims. As a young man on the rise, he learned how to
turn a calculated deference to his elders to his advantage. As one of his fel-
low congressional aides from the early 1930s would recall, "With men who
had power, men who could help him, Lyndon Johnson was a professional
son."8 Ambition overrode ideology: in the company of conservative elders he
was conservative; in the company of liberals, he was liberal. Coming to Wash-
ington on the eve of the New Deal, the prevailing winds were from the lib-
erals, and he tacked accordingly.

Johnson formed one of his most rewarding relationships with fellow
Texan Sam Rayburn, the House Democratic leader and later Speaker of the
House. In 1935 Rayburn helped him secure appointment as Texas state di-
rector of the National Youth Administration (NYA), a New Deal agency that
provided work grants to needy college students and public employment to
other young people in need of jobs. In 1937 when the congressman from his
home district in Texas suddenly died, Johnson declared himself a candidate.
He ran a campaign designed to link himself in voters' minds with President
Roosevelt and the New Deal: "Franklin D. and Lyndon B." read his campaign
signs. After his election, he returned to Washington, where he met the pre-
sident for the first time. Roosevelt wasn't taken in by Johnson's "professional
son" routine, but he was impressed nonetheless. He remarked to political ad-
viser Harry Hopkins, "this boy could well be the first Southern President."9

Johnson continued his climb to power with election to the U.S. Senate
in 1948; having secured the Democratic nomination (tantamount to election
in Texas in those years) by a scant and suspect majority of 87 votes, he also
acquired the painful nickname of "Landslide Lyndon." In his years in the
Senate he grew more conservative, reflecting both the mood of Texas voters
and increasingly close ties with the oil and gas interests in his home state.
(He also became a wealthy man in those years, building a financial empire
in television stations—a field of enterprise in which his influence with the
Federal Communications Commission did not hurt him in besting his com-
cmercial rivals.) In 1953 he was elected by his Democratic colleagues as Sen-
ate minority leader, and in 1955, after Democrats had regained control of the
Senate, he was elevated to majority leader.

No longer the deferential youngster, Lyndon Johnson was now a tower-
ing presence in the Senate anterooms where deals were cut, a wheeler-dealer
who poked his face within inches of his fellow senators, gripping their fore-
arms with one hand, persuading, intimidating, and calling in his debts to se-
cure the votes he needed for advancing his legislative and personal agenda.

In November 1960 Johnson advanced to within one heartbeat of the pres-
idency. And for the next three years, it seemed to him that was as close as
he was ever likely to get. The vice presidency was no place for a man with a
Texas-sized ego. Johnson had served his purpose for the Kennedys in 1960
in helping his running mate secure the loyalty of southern Democrats; now
the president and his brother Bobby had neither use nor respect for the talents of "Landslide Lyndon." "I cannot stand Johnson's damn long face," President Kennedy complained to a sympathetic listener. "He just comes in, sits at the Cabinet meetings with his face all screwed up, never says anything. He looks so sad." Kennedy started sending the vice president on round-the-world goodwill trips, just to get him out of Washington and out of sight. And then came the trip to Dallas.

"Everything I had ever learned in the history books taught me that martyrs have to die for causes," Johnson would tell interviewer Doris Kearns after his own presidency had come to an end:

John Kennedy had died. But his "cause" was not really clear. That was my job. I had to take the dead man's program and turn it into a martyr's cause.11

President Johnson's campaign to lay claim to Kennedy's legislative mantle began the night in November 1963 when he first addressed a joint session of Congress. There was, Johnson declared, "no memorial or eulogy [that] could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil rights bill for which he fought."12 It was not by accident that Johnson began his campaign for "Kennedy's program" with civil rights. As a southerner, he had a better-than-average record on civil rights, but he also had to contend with the suspicions of civil rights activists and northern liberals that he would seek to turn the clock back on race relations to the pre-Kennedy status quo. Johnson laid those doubts to rest as he brought all his formidable persuasive powers to bear to achieve passage of the Civil Rights Act, which until that point had been considered unlikely to pass anytime before the next presidential election. The proposed legislation would outlaw segregation in public facilities and racial discrimination in employment and education. On July 2, 1964, he was able to sign the bill into law. It was the most significant federal measure on behalf of equal rights for black Americans seen since the Reconstruction era. And, since a southern congressman had somewhat whimsically amended the act to ban gender as well as racial discrimination, the Civil Rights Act proved a turning point in the legal rights of women as well as blacks.13

Civil rights was just the beginning, as Johnson also turned his attention to the economy. By the end of February 1964, he had secured passage of Kennedy's proposal for a tax cut, a measure that had spent the last 10 months stalled in various congressional committees. To win support for the tax cut, he had pledged that he would hold the next year's federal budget to under $100 billion. The promise seemed to dictate cautious spending policies, with no dramatic new government programs.
But Johnson was not in the mood for caution. He had not spent a quarter-century climbing the rungs of power in Washington just to become a Democratic version of Dwight Eisenhower. He wanted to be the Franklin Delano Roosevelt of the 1960s; indeed, he dreamed of outdoing Roosevelt in the breadth and popularity of his programs and legacy. So Johnson was going to have his tax cut, and he was also going to have the kind of bold social programs that many people had by now persuaded themselves John Kennedy had stood for.  

Kennedy had, in fact, contemplated introducing some new liberal reform measures in the year leading up to the 1964 presidential election. In the spring of 1963, Kennedy’s economic adviser Walter Heller had passed along to the president a copy of a recently published book entitled The Other America by the socialist activist and intellectual Michael Harrington. Despite the prevailing consensus about the arrival of the “affluent society,” Harrington argued that there was “another America” of 40 to 50 million inhabitants living in the United States, the unskilled workers, the migrant farm workers, the aged, the minorities, and all the others who live in the economic underworld of American life.” This “invisible land” of the poor existed in rural isolation or in crowded urban slums where middle-class visitors seldom ventured. “That the poor are invisible,” Harrington wrote, “is one of the most important things about them.”

Harrington’s other main point, for which he acknowledged his debt to anthropologist Oscar Lewis, was that “poverty is a culture.” Poor Americans were not simply distinguishable by their lack of adequate income. Rather, they were “people who lack education and skill, who have bad health, poor housing, low levels of aspiration and high levels of mental distress.” Each of these problems was “the more intense because it exists within a web of disabilities.” The tenacity of the “culture of poverty,” which was passed down from generation to generation of poor Americans, meant that it was a delusion to believe that poverty as an economic condition could be solved by exhortations to the poor to lift themselves up by their own bootstraps. “Society,” Harrington concluded, “must help them before they can help themselves.”

Harrington’s statistics and the case he presented for federal action on behalf of the “invisible poor” impressed Kennedy. He had not forgotten the scenes of economic destitution he had encountered while campaigning in the West Virginia primary in 1960. When the president conferred with Heller for what turned out to be the last time in November 1963, he told him that he definitely wanted to include some kind of antipoverty program in next year’s legislative package.

On the day after Kennedy’s assassination, Heller briefed the new president on economic issues, mentioning Kennedy’s interest in antipoverty legislation. “That’s my kind of program,” Johnson responded. “Move full speed ahead.” A scant six weeks later, in his State of the Union address in January
1964, Johnson announced that his administration, “today, here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America.”

Johnson pushed the war on poverty as another tribute to John Kennedy. But unlike the civil rights act or the tax cut legislation, which had actually been drafted and submitted to Congress before Kennedy’s assassination, the “war on poverty” was little more than a phrase and a file drawer full of position papers from obscure government functionaries and academic theorists. All Johnson knew for sure about the program when he gave told Walter Heller to go “full speed ahead” was that he wanted something big. When approached the following month with a proposal for a modest experimental antipoverty program, limited to five urban and five rural pilot projects, Johnson was not impressed. Congress didn’t like to fund experiments, and neither did he. He wanted something he could sell to the country as the solution to poverty. “These boys are pretty theoretical down here,” Johnson complained to civil rights leader Roy Wilkins in January, shortly before his declaration of the war on poverty, “and if I get it passed, I’m gonna have to have more practical plans.”18
Johnson appointed Sargent Shriver to convene a task force to draw up antipoverty legislation. The appointment was a shrewd one. As Kennedy's brother-in-law, Shriver was a useful symbol of continuity with the past administration. He was also the founding director of the Peace Corps, one of the most politically popular of the Kennedy administration’s initiatives. Johnson hoped that the Congress and the public would respond to the new call for a crusade to end poverty at home with the same enthusiasm they had shown for the idea of spreading American ideals and practical know-how to impoverished nations abroad. "The sky's the limit," Johnson told Shriver in persuading him to take on this new task. "You just make this thing work, period. I don't give a damn about the details."

It turned out, however, that Johnson did give a damn about the details. There is one simple solution to poverty (technically simple, if politically complicated), and that is for government to take money from those who have it, through taxation, and pass it on to those who lack it. This is what economists call "income redistribution" or "transfer payments," and is more popularly known as "welfare" or "the dole." But Johnson, already committed to passing a tax cut that would benefit wealthy and middle-class voters, was unsympathetic to that approach. "You tell Shriver, no doles," was the message he gave to aide Bill Moyers to pass on to Shriver as planning for the war on poverty began.

Another solution to poverty is to have government provide the poor with jobs. In part that was what Johnson's tax cut was designed to accomplish, if only indirectly: putting more money into the pockets of better-off consumers would in turn stimulate demand for goods and services from private industry, leading to increased production and, presumably, higher employment rates among the formerly jobless. If that process proved too slow, or was undermined by "automation" (business investment in labor-saving machinery and techniques), or simply failed to reach groups cut off from the benefits of an expanding economy, such as unemployed coal miners in isolated and depressed regions like Appalachia, the government might also step in directly as employer of last resort. That would mean launching the kind of federally sponsored public works projects undertaken by Roosevelt's New Deal during the Great Depression (building and maintaining roads, schools, airports, and so on) and/or the expansion of public services (hiring more teachers, social workers, firemen, and the like). This was, or had been since the 1930s, the classic liberal solution to economic difficulties (John Kenneth Galbraith had made an eloquent case for increased public services in The Affluent Society). But such programs were expensive; President Roosevelt's Works Projects Administration (WPA) cost $5 billion in its first year of operation, an unprecedented federal expenditure for domestic welfare. They also carried political liabilities, with the business community tending to view them as wasteful subsidies to workers lacking the initiative or skill to find jobs on their own.
So, although Johnson had promised Shriver that “the sky’s the limit,” it turned out to be a low-ceilinged sky indeed. Johnson told Shriver he could have under a billion dollars for the first year’s war on poverty programs—or less than one-fifth what Roosevelt had secured for the WPA in 1935 (more like one-tenth, taking into account the inflation of the preceding 30 years.) As members of Shriver’s task force deliberated in the spring of 1964, they operated under planning constraints that led them to fashion a strategy for ending poverty that was quite different in scope and philosophy from that of the New Deal era.

The war on poverty, as it finally emerged from the planning process, was designed to be fought through government-sponsored programs that would help the poor to improve themselves—a “hand up, not a handout,” as Shriver would put it. The war on poverty was not going to be a jobs program, and it was certainly not intended to be a welfare program. If anything, the war on poverty strategists believed that their efforts would lead to a vast reduction in existing government programs providing cash benefits to the poor, such as Aid to Families of Dependent Children (AFDC), a welfare program created in 1935 to help single-parent families with children. Under the war on poverty, poor Americans would be encouraged to take advantage of job-training programs and other forms of educational assistance that would allow them to benefit from the opportunities provided by an expanding national economy—hence the title given Shriver’s package of legislative proposals, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. Only the truly unemployable—widows with small children at home, and people with severe disabilities such as blindness—would still have to turn to welfare agencies for assistance. The war on poverty would not seek to transfer income and would not seek to transform the economy. The only thing it sought to change was the worldview of the poor, the “culture of poverty” that Michael Harrington had discussed in *The Other America*.

The press coverage of the war on poverty that spring was extensive and, for the most part, sympathetic. Harrington’s book became a best-seller in paperback, and his “invisible poor” were being sought out by an army of newspaper and television reporters. President Johnson did his part by making a well-orchestrated trip to eastern Kentucky in late April, where he visited with an unemployed coal miner named Tom Fletcher and his wife and children in their three-room, tarpaper-covered shack.22 Harry Caudill’s *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, a portrait of life in southern Appalachia published in 1963, was also influential in shaping the emerging image of the newly visible poor. “This is Daniel Boone country,” wrote Johnson’s liberal Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall in his foreword to Caudill’s book. He further described the Cumberland Plateau of Kentucky as a region where once “fiercely independent frontiersmen found in these isolated valleys the elements that sustained vigorous life.”23
As long as the poor continued to be thought of as the great, great grand-
children of Daniel Boone—which is to say white and rural—the fortunes of
the war on poverty would remain in the ascendant. And yet, even in the
spring of 1964 when most Americans pronounced themselves in favor of
Johnson’s antipoverty efforts, public opinion polls nonetheless revealed that
at the same time a plurality continued to believe that the poor were partly
or mainly to blame for their own condition. In March the Gallup poll asked
the following question: “Which is more often to blame if a person is poor—
lack of effort on his own part, or circumstances beyond his control?” The re-
results were revealing: 33 percent of the sample responded “lack of effort,” 29
percent blamed “circumstances,” and 32 percent thought the two were equally
important.24

Signed into law in August 1964, the Economic Opportunity Act es-
blished the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) as an independent federal
agency under the directorship of Sargent Shriver, with an initial appro-
piation of $800 million. Most of OEO’s limited funding would go toward pro-
viding grants to locally organized community action agencies (CAAs) in poor
neighborhoods across the country (over a thousand of them would be set up
in the next year.) The CAAs were charged with determining what mix of gov-
ernment programs would work best in combating poverty in their particular
neighborhoods, and then setting up and administering those programs. (In
a provision attracting little attention at the time, the CAAs were required to
seek the “maximum feasible participation” of the poor themselves in their
operations.)

Among the programs OEO would oversee was a Job Corps (provid-
ing vocational training to unemployed teenagers), several other work-training
and work-study programs, and literacy and adult education programs.
There were loan programs for struggling farmers and small businessmen.
There were also provisions for various kinds of “in-kind assistance,” such
as food stamps, designed to improve the immediate health and circum-
stances of the poor. Finally the war on poverty legislation
established VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) as a kind of domes-
tic Peace Corps, enlisting volunteers for social service work in poor
neighborhoods.

Johnson’s legislative agenda for the spring of 1964 resembled a Christ-
mas gift list. There was the civil rights act for blacks. There was a tax cut for
the better-off. And there was a war on poverty for the poor. But Johnson did
not want to simply provide services for this or that constituency. His vision
of politics was much grander. He was after “consensus,” the creation of a
great and durable political majority who shared a common vision of an ideal
America. And so in May, in preparation for the fall presidential campaign,
Johnson set forth his political philosophy in a speech to a wildly enthusiastic
audience of students at the University of Michigan. What he hoped to ac-
complish as president, Johnson declared, was nothing less than the creation of a “Great Society”:

The Great Society... demands an end to poverty and racial injustice... But that is just the beginning. The Great Society is a place where every child can find knowledge to enrich his mind and enlarge his talent... where leisure is a welcome chance to build and reflect, not a feared cause of boredom and restlessness... where the city of man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community.25

This was Schlesinger's call for a new “qualitative liberalism” coming to fruition, but with an important difference. Johnson's speech was no cautious exercise in “fact-finding, expertise, and background papers.” The rhetoric, crafted by former Kennedy speechwriter Richard Goodwin, was exalted, evangelical, and unabashedly utopian. “Will you join in the battle to give every citizen the full equality which God enjoins and the law requires?” Johnson called to the students. “Yes!” they shouted back. “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?” “Yes!” again, came the response. The speech was an enormous success. As Goodwin would note, it capped the process by which “the country witnessed, first with relief, then with gathering acclaim, the unexpected emergence of a new leader who seemed both formidable and benign.”26 Johnson was becoming the country's leader in his own right, no longer simply chief caretaker of the Kennedy shrine.

The next six months proved the high point of Lyndon Johnson's presidency and life. Though far ahead in the polls (and even further ahead after the Republicans, in a raucous and divisive national convention, nominated ultraconservative Arizonan Barry Goldwater as their standard-bearer), Johnson nonetheless kept up a campaign schedule that exhausted younger aides. Whenever his energy seemed to flag, all he had to do was come in contact with adoring voters. If he lacked Kennedy's glamour, he made up for it in folksy enthusiasm. Huge crowds turned out along the routes of his motorcades across the country; as he drove past, Johnson would shout to them as if he were campaigning with his father back in the Texan hill country, “Come down an' hear the speakin'!” or “Bring your children and the family to hear the speakin!”27 In November Johnson swept past Goldwater with 61 percent of the popular vote, better than Franklin Roosevelt had managed in his great reelection victory in 1936. No one could ever again describe the president as “Landslide Lyndon” with ironic intent.

President Johnson had dealt with another Kennedy legacy in 1964, even as he was crafting his war on poverty, and that was the war in Vietnam. Johnson was every bit as determined as Kennedy had been to avoid a politically damaging debate (“Who lost Vietnam?”). Not only did he have to prove to the
Republicans that he was tough on communism, he also had to prove to his own party that he was as strong a leader as the slain president. A masterful figure in domestic politics, Johnson had little experience in international affairs. Although often resentful of what he considered slights from the well-educated elitists in Kennedy’s circle of advisers, he also was intimidated by them and deferred to what he regarded as their superior wisdom. This was particularly true in the case of Robert McNamara, whom Johnson called “the ablest man I’ve ever met.” Three days after Kennedy’s assassination, Johnson issued secret instructions requiring “all senior officers of the government” to provide “full unity of support for established U.S. policy in South Vietnam.”

When Robert McNamara returned from a visit to Vietnam in December 1963, he again assured the press of the great progress being made there. Privately, he warned the new president that the “current trend” in Vietnam “will lead to neutralization at best or more likely to a Communist-controlled state.” Following his next visit to Saigon, in March 1964, McNamara reported to Johnson that things had “unquestionably been growing worse” since the previous fall. The Communists were more numerous, better armed, and extending their control over much of the countryside, while the new South Vietnamese government was proving even more ineffective than the Diem regime. In fact, it was hard to tell who was in control in Saigon; over the next year, there would be a total of three coups and five governments briefly in power.

President Johnson was being told by McNamara and the other foreign policy advisers he had inherited from John Kennedy that, however unpromising the situation in South Vietnam appeared, the United States had to stay the course set by his slain predecessor. Johnson agreed. But every once in awhile he would turn to one of his older associates, Senior Richard Russell of Georgia, for an alternate opinion. Russell had been a good friend and loyal backer of Johnson for many years, and Johnson respected his political advice. Although a resolute conservative and anti-Communist, Russell was deadset against the deepening American involvement in the Vietnam War. “We should get out” of Vietnam, Russell told the new president in a telephone conversation (recorded by Johnson) on December 7, 1963, just two weeks after John F. Kennedy’s assassination. Russell reminded Johnson of how the two of them had met with President Dwight Eisenhower in 1954, and urged him not to provide direct military assistance to the French in Indochina. “I tried my best to keep them from going into Laos and Vietnam. . . . Said we’d never get out, be in there fifty years from now.”

Six months later, on May 27, 1964, Johnson called Russell again and plaintively asked him “What do you think of this Vietnam thing? I’d like to hear you talk a little.” Russell leaped at the opportunity to save his old friend from what he saw as a disastrous policy and misguided advice. “It’s
the worst damn mess I ever saw... our position is deteriorating... a tragic situation. It's just one of those place where you can't win. Anything that you do is wrong..." Russell had just gotten through listening to Robert McNamara's testimony on U.S. policy in Vietnam before the Senate Armed Services Committee, which Russell chaired. He had not been impressed: "I'm not sure he's as objective as he ought to be in surveying the conditions out there. He feels like it's sort of up to him personally to see that the thing goes through. And he's a can-do fellow. But I'm not too sure he understands the history and background of those people out there as fully as he should."

Russell was particularly scathing about those who were urging the president to launch air strikes against North Vietnam, a strategy he characterized as "Bomb the North, and kill old men, women and children." He had no faith in the ability of American air power to cut off North Vietnamese support for the insurgency in the South: "We tried it in Korea. We even got a lot of old B-29s to increase the bomb load and sent 'em over there and just dropped millions and millions of bombs, day and night, and in the morning, they would [fix] the road and in the morning, the damn people would be back traveling over it... We could never actually interdict all their lines of communication although we had absolute control of the seas and the air, and we never did stop them. And you ain't gonna stop these people either." Johnson listened carefully to his old friend, agreed with him often, but concluded with a resigned sigh, "Well, they'd impeach a president though that would run out, wouldn't they?"

Unable to do anything about the deteriorating political situation in South Vietnam, frustrated American policymakers concluded that the solution lay in carrying the war directly to North Vietnam. "We are swatting flies," Air Force Chief of Staff Curtis LeMay declared in December 1963, "when we should be going after the manure pile." Over the next few months, Johnson's military and civilian advisers developed plans for a series of military escalations leading to a full-scale bombing campaign against North Vietnam. They drew up a draft of a congressional resolution of support for American policy in Vietnam, intending to introduce it at the right moment to secure bipartisan endorsement for the war. Johnson sought to postpone any decisive action in Vietnam until after the November election. But at summer's end Americans got a foretaste of the widened war to come.

On July 30, the U.S. destroyer Maddox entered the Gulf of Tonkin, the coastal waters that lie beside North Vietnam. The Maddox was monitoring North Vietnamese radio broadcasts, attempting to gauge the strength of the country's coastal defense. Ever since February, South Vietnamese PT boats had been raiding North Vietnamese coastal installations, as part of an American-designed operation code-named Operation Plan 34A. Now they struck
again, raiding two North Vietnamese islands. The North Vietnamese were on edge, expecting further assaults at any moment. In the next few days the Maddox sailed as close as 8 miles to the North Vietnamese mainland and 4 miles to the islands attacked by the South Vietnamese.

On the night of August 2, three North Vietnamese torpedo boats sailed at high speed toward the Maddox (possibly believing it to be the South Vietnamese vessel involved in the July 30 raid). The Americans fired first; the North Vietnamese responded by launching two torpedoes. In the 37-minute battle that followed, two torpedo boats were damaged by American planes, and a third by shellfire from the Maddox. The Maddox itself was unscathed, and there were no U.S. casualties.

The Navy ordered another destroyer, the C. Turner Joy, to join the Maddox in the Gulf. The next night, August 3, South Vietnamese ships again raided the North Vietnamese coast. On the evening of August 4, sailors aboard the Maddox began to pick up radar and sonar readings indicating the presence of enemy ships. Although there were no visual sightings of North Vietnamese craft, several sailors claimed to have seen torpedo wakes heading toward the destroyers. Over the next 2 hours, seamen manning sonar equipment reported 22 torpedoes fired at the Maddox. The Maddox and the Turner Joy fired 400 shells in the direction from which the attack seemed to be coming.

They also called in air support. But the planes from the USS Ticonderoga could find no sign of the enemy. The captain of the Maddox finally called off his gunners and cabled his superiors: "Entire action leaves many doubts. Suggest complete evaluation before any further action." Later it would be suggested that a jittery sonar man aboard the Maddox had mistaken the sound of his own ship's rudder for onrushing enemy torpedoes, while freak weather conditions led to a misinterpretation of radar readings. In retrospect, it seems likely that there were no North Vietnamese ships in the area that night.

Notwithstanding the murky circumstances surrounding the supposed attack, policymakers in Washington set in motion contingency plans developed the previous spring for military escalation. In a televised address shortly before midnight on August 4, President Johnson announced that in retaliation for an unprovoked attack on American ships on the high seas, U.S. bombers were already on their way to North Vietnam. Two U.S. planes were shot down in the attack, which struck at North Vietnamese fuel depots, PT boat bases, and antiaircraft installations. One pilot died, while the other, Lieutenant (j.g.) Everett Alvarez, was taken prisoner. He would remain a captive in North Vietnam until 1973.

According to public opinion polls, an overwhelming majority of Americans approved the raids against North Vietnam. With their servicemen under attack, as they were told was the case, Americans instinctively rallied around the flag and their president's policies. The Gulf of Tonkin events were seen as a kind of mini-Pearl Harbor, except this time it was the enemy that
was sent away with a bloody nose. Television commentators and editorial writers hailed President Johnson's cool-headed resolution in the crisis, and his standing in public opinion polls jumped.\textsuperscript{35}

Privately, Johnson was skeptical about the August 4 incident, confiding to an aide, "Hell, those dumb stupid sailors were just shooting at flying fish."\textsuperscript{36} But he was delighted by the chance to strike a blow at the Vietnamese Communists, boasting, "I didn't just screw Ho Chi Minh. I cut his pecker off."\textsuperscript{37} More importantly, following the script devised by his advisers that spring, Johnson was able to go before Congress to ask for a resolution authorizing him to "take all necessary measures to repel an armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression."\textsuperscript{38} The resulting Gulf of Tonkin resolution passed the House of Representatives unanimously, and passed the Senate with only two dissenting votes, those of Ernst Gruening of Alaska and Wayne Morse of Oregon, and went on to serve as the legal justification for the war until its repeal by Congress in 1970.

The Gulf of Tonkin incident also served Johnson well in the fall presidential election. Having dispatched bombers to take what most Americans regarded as a just and measured retribution for Communist aggression on the high seas, Johnson was free thereafter to campaign as a man of peace. At a campaign rally near his Texas ranch on August 29, he declared unequivocally:

\begin{quote}
I have had advice to load our planes with bombs and to drop them on certain areas that I think would enlarge the war and escalate the war, and result in our committing a good many American boys to fighting a war that I think ought to be fought by the boys of Asia to help protect their own land.\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

With Barry Goldwater prone to loose speculation on how useful tactical nuclear weapons might prove in the jungles of Vietnam, most voters preferred to entrust the foreign policy of the United States and the fate of "American boys" in uniform to a moderate, reasonable, and seasoned commander-in-chief like Lyndon Johnson.

"Don't stay up late," the president admonished the celebrants as he left his inaugural ball in January 1965. "There's work to be done. We're on our way to the Great Society."\textsuperscript{40} When the 89th Congress opened deliberations later that month, Johnson prepared to move swiftly on many fronts. He could call on the support of the strongest Democratic majority in the House and Senate since the heyday of the New Deal. The Democrats had picked up 2 seats in the Senate, and 37 more in the House of Representatives in the fall elections. Liberal Democrats, in alliance with the remaining liberal northern Republicans, could now construct a majority without having to depend on the votes of conservative southern Democrats. Yet Johnson still felt a sense of urgency. He knew how temporary even the most convincing electoral man-
date could prove. "We've got to do this in a hurry," Johnson exhorted legislative aides. Banging his fist on the wall for emphasis, he added, "I want to see this coonskin on the wall." 41

If President Johnson had done nothing else but preside over bill-signing ceremonies, he would have had a busy schedule in 1965. In the first six months of the year, the administration submitted 87 bills—"coonskins" in Johnson's terminology—to Congress. By October, when Congress recessed and Johnson entered the hospital for gall bladder surgery, he had nailed 84 of them to the White House wall. Johnson claimed that not even his old political hero Franklin Roosevelt in his first year in office had signed so many fundamental reforms into law.

Among the bills the president put his signature to in 1965 were social welfare measures providing federal health insurance for the aged (Medicare) and for poor families (Medicaid). Proposals for some sort of national health insurance had been a staple of the liberal agenda since Harry Truman's presidency, but had been stymied by the medical lobby, which denounced the specter of "socialized medicine." Even at this high point of liberal influence, Johnson did not feel he had the votes to deliver a program for universal health coverage. But he was able to bring a measure of protection to two of the most vulnerable groups in the country in terms of health problems.

Medicare turned out to be a very popular program. Far from being regarded by the public as an unwarranted intrusion of the government into a previously sacrosanct economic activity, it was seen as the natural extension of the already popular provisions for social security pensions; soon after its passage, over four out of five Americans proclaimed themselves backers of the measure. In fact, of all social groups in the country, the elderly may have benefited most from the liberal reforms of the 1960s. In addition to Medicare, elderly Americans also benefited from new policies tying social security payments to the cost of living. As a result, the poverty level among elderly Americans dropped precipitously by the mid-1970s. For those over the age of 65, the war on poverty proved an unqualified success. Senior citizens, known to politicians as reliable and knowledgeable voters, proved so highly effective in lobbying in their own interest that some commentators began to refer to the emergence of "Grey Power." 42

In his 1965 State of the Union address, Johnson had committed himself to preserving a "green legacy" for future Americans. In line with that pledge, and reflecting the concerns of the "qualitative liberalism" of the 1950s as well as those of a newly emerging environmentalist movement, Johnson backed a measure proposed by Senator Edmund Muskie of Maine to establish federal regulations protecting the nation's water quality against industrial and other forms of pollution. In October Johnson signed the Water Quality Act of 1965, better known as the Clean Water Act, into law, proclaiming (in a perhaps deliberate echo of the themes of Galbraith's Affluent Society) the nation's "re-
fusal to be strangled by the wastes of civilization." The two weeks later he signed another bill, the Clean Air Act, also proposed by Muskie, establishing federal air quality regulations.

The 89th Congress passed, at the president's behest, measures establishing a new cabinet-level agency, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), as well as endowments providing federal grants to support scholarship and the arts. Congress also passed measures providing federal aid to elementary and secondary schools, as well as providing federal scholarships for low-income college students (and underwriting private education loans to better-off students).

As important as Johnson's Great Society legislative initiatives were in realizing the liberal agenda in the mid-1960s, they were not the only force pushing for social reform. The federal judiciary and new social movements outside of government also played important roles in the decade's resurgent liberalism.

The mid-1960s were the third time in the twentieth century that reformers in the White House and Congress joined together in seeking fundamental changes in American society. In dramatic contrast to earlier periods of liberal ferment, like the Progressive Era and the New Deal, this time the reformers were joined, rather than being opposed, by a majority of justices of the Supreme Court. Indeed, the reformist mood of the Supreme Court preceded that in the other branches of the federal government by a decade.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Supreme Court dramatically broadened the definition of constitutional rights guaranteed United States citizens. Under the direction of Earl Warren, the California Republican appointed by President Eisenhower in 1953, the Court's decisions encouraged and lent legitimacy to new social movements, particularly those concerned with the conditions of minority groups and women.

The language of "rights" is central to the American experience, as a quick glance at the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution will confirm. But there never has been a consensus on exactly what and who was to be included in these broad assertions of natural and equal rights. Much of the history of the United States consists of a process by which more and more groups lay claim to more and more rights. However, until the 1960s, most of the excluded constituencies and insurgent movements seeking what they saw as their fair share of rights—blacks, women, working men and women, and others—focused their demands in terms of equal treatment before the law and equal ability to participate in the political process. They sought an extension of the franchise and the protection of rights of free speech, free assembly, and free association.

The 1960s and their aftermath led to an explosion of demands for new rights—such as rights to reproductive freedom—or by groups who had not
been thought of as possessing any special rights of their own—such as homosexuals, criminal defendants, convicted prisoners, mental patients, the handicapped, and welfare recipients.  

In 1954, as the newly appointed chief justice, Earl Warren played a central role in persuading several wavering justices to sign on to the Court's unanimous decision in favor of the NAACP's position in Brown. Warren nursed a guilty conscience from his role in the incarceration of California's Japanese Americans in the Second World War; he had been state attorney general at the time and had provided legal justification for the decision. Brown, and subsequent Court decisions reinforcing civil rights and civil liberties, were at least in part his atonement for complicity in that earlier act of racial injustice.

If the only Supreme Court ruling with which Earl Warren's name was associated was Brown v. Board of Education, he would still be remembered as one of the most influential chief justices in American legal history. But Brown was just the beginning of 15 years of landmark decisions. In the late 1950s, in a series of cases involving civil liberties of Communists, the Warren Court restricted the power of government to punish political dissenters. In the late 1950s and in the 1960s, the Court struck down censorship statutes banning pornography and made it more difficult for public officials to bring libel suits against media critics. In a series of decisions, starting with Baker v. Carr (1962) and concluding with Reynolds v. Sims (1964), the Court ordered that American electoral districts from the state to the federal levels be reapportioned according to the principle of equal legislative representation for equal numbers of people (more popularly known as "one man, one vote"). This overturned the excessive power that sparsely populated (and usually conservative) rural districts had long exercised in American politics.

In the 1960s the Court also rendered decisions in a series of cases involving the rights to due process for criminal defendants, excluding the use of improperly seized evidence in criminal trials and guaranteeing the right of indigents to an attorney in felony trials. Most famously, in Miranda v. Arizona (1966), the justices excluded the use of improperly obtained confessions from criminal trials.

Griswold v. Connecticut (1965) was an exceptionally important decision, although its full ramifications became clear only after Warren left the Court. The decision struck down a ban in the state of Connecticut on the dissemination of information about contraception. By this point the widespread availability of birth control pills had made the Connecticut statute seem like a relic of Victorian prudery (Justice Potter Stewart called it an "uncommonly silly law"). The real significance of the case lay in the Court's reasoning that the law was unconstitutional because it interfered with the "right to privacy"—a right nowhere mentioned in the Constitution, but that a majority of the justices now felt was "implied." This expansive definition of rights,
which would survive Earl Warren’s retirement as chief justice in 1969, lay at the base of the Court’s ruling in Roe v. Wade (1973) which overturned state laws banning abortion.

Many of the Court’s decisions involved it in controversial social issues. The Warren Court energized both the Left, in support, and the Right, in opposition. Liberals celebrated the Supreme Court’s attempts to remedy injustice through “judicial activism”; conservatives, who had previously looked to the courts as a reliable bastion against liberal innovations in public policy, now condemned the Supreme Court for exercising “judicial tyranny.” One of the legacies of the Warren Court was that future nominees for the bench would receive a thorough ideological scrutiny from liberal and conservative advocacy groups, and from Congress, unlike anything that had prevailed in the nomination process in the past.

The United States, as observers since the time of de Tocqueville have noted, is a society of joiners. Throughout the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, Americans banded together around issues of moral and political reform, usually defined as doing away with one or another social evil, from the abolition of slavery to the abolition of saloons. That tradition seemed to languish in mid-twentieth century America. With the exception of the NAACP, with nearly 400,000 members in 1960, advocacy groups associated with liberal causes could count on, at most, a few tens of thousands of members: in 1960, for example, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) had 52,000 members, the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE) fewer than 25,000, ADA about 20,000, the Sierra Club just over 16,000. [In contrast, in 1919, out of a much smaller population, the National American Women’s Suffrage Association (NAWSA) counted over 2 million loosely affiliated members.]\(^{88}\)

McCarthyism was among the reasons for this relatively low membership in liberal groups; years of seeing people hauled before congressional investigating committees for having joined the wrong group or signed the wrong petition certainly did not encourage political participation that extended beyond the anonymity of the voting booth. But the low enrollments were also the product of a lack of interest on the part of the advocacy groups themselves in expanding membership. For the most part, these were not organizations of activists. Members paid their dues, and perhaps attended an annual banquet (or, in the case of the Sierra Club, a hike), but otherwise let the leaders of these highly centralized groups do the advocating. It was a style of political organizing that assumed that a word from a prominent insider to a legislator or reporter carried more weight than any number of mass, public expressions of dissent or support. And for that, these groups didn’t need a large or particularly active membership.\(^{49}\)

But that would soon change, largely as a result of the influence of the civil rights movement, with its emphasis on local organizing and direct action. In the early 1960s, civil rights support activities gave large numbers of
northern white liberals a crash course in the dynamics of mass organization. Consider the case of the ACLU. From the sit-ins in the spring of 1960 and on through the decade, the ACLU dispatched attorneys and raised funds to defend people arrested in civil rights protests. The ACLU also greatly expanded its notion of what constituted "civil liberties"—defining the protection of free speech and free association to include such new concerns as draft resistance, prisoners' rights, and reproductive rights. In line with its new activist policies, the organization actively recruited new members and opened new offices. By 1965 it was up to 80,000 members; by 1970, over 100,000. It also became a truly national organization in the same period, expanding from 7 state affiliates in 1960 to more than 40 a decade later.50

The Sierra Club went through a similar transition, growing to 29,000 members in 1965, and to over 100,000 in 1970. From its traditional base in California, it grew into a national movement and one that, notwithstanding battles between traditionalists and activists in its leadership, was far more combative vis à vis both industry and government than it had been in its early days. Increasingly, its focus was on fighting polluters, not simply on preserving wilderness. In addition to its handsome calendars and glossy picture books, the club was now issuing paperbacks with titles like Ecotactics: The Sierra Club Handbook for Environmental Activists.51 Other long-established environmental groups like the National Audubon Society and the Wilderness Society would follow the Sierra Club's example in embracing an activist style and strategy. And across the country, local advocacy groups, focused on issues ranging from industrial pollution to nuclear safety sprang up—particularly after 1969 when a disastrous oil spill caused by offshore drilling operations polluted the beaches of prosperous communities in California like Santa Barbara.52

New departures in liberal activism were not confined to the white middle class. In the rich farming region of California's San Joaquin Valley, a group of activists, most of them Mexican American, created a labor movement dedicated to improving the lives of some of the most exploited workers in the land. Migrant farmworkers typically earned no more than the minimum wage and endured painful and often dangerous working conditions to plant and harvest the fruits and vegetables Americans consumed daily. Many workers spent their days bent over at the waist because employers furnished them only with short hoes; laborers risked their health picking crops sprayed with powerful disinfectants. Unprotected by federal or state labor laws and ignored by politicians, the farmworkers needed to find a way to wake up the nation.

In 1962 Cesar Chavez, a veteran community activist who had been a migrant laborer himself, spearheaded formation of the first union of farmworkers established since the Great Depression—and the only one ever controlled by the Mexican Americans who made up the majority of California field laborers. In 1965 the United Farm Workers threw its small membership into a
strike against the grape growers of the San Joaquin Valley. Rapidly, the work stoppage mushroomed into a peaceful uprising by an ethnic group the Anglo majority had long disparaged. In mass demonstrations, including a 300-mile march to the state capital, union workers held aloft banners emblazoned with a black Aztec eagle on a bright-red background and others adorned with the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico. Chavez called the movement “both a religious pilgrimage and a plea for social change,” and, throughout the Southwest, “La Causa” sparked a political awakening among Mexican Americans who had been relatively quiescent before.53

But Chavez and his fellow organizers knew that only massive pressure would force the growers to abandon the use of nonunion workers. So the United Farm Workers broadened their movement into a national civil rights cause. Beginning in 1966, the union drew on thousands of middle-class liberal allies, most of them Anglo, to mobilize a national boycott of table grapes. Prominent supporters like Senator Robert F. Kennedy, UAW president Walter Reuther, Catholic bishops, and actor Paul Newman helped publicize the
boycott and raise funds. And the boycotters became a sophisticated team. "We got to the point where we could track a grape shipment from California to Appleton, Wisconsin, and have pickets waiting for them at the loading docks at two o'clock in the morning," recalled one organizer. In 1970, after an arduous five years of struggle, most grape growers in the San Joaquin agreed to recognize the union.

Perhaps the most significant new social movement to emerge in the 1960s was the movement for the equality of women. Unlike the first women's rights movement, which had required nearly three-quarters of a century to achieve the right to vote, the revived movement for women's rights in the 1960s realized many of its goals with astonishing rapidity. Not that scoffers and opponents were absent; feminists were derided in many quarters in the 1960s, on the left as well as the right, as unattractive, extremists. Still, within a decade of what has been called the "second wave" of American feminism, public opinion polls showed that most women and many men embraced proposals that, when advanced in the 1960s, had been confined to the margins of American political and social discourse: equal pay for equal work, equal responsibility of men and women for housework and child rearing, an end to domestic violence, an end to the "glass ceiling" that kept women out of managerial positions, an end to sexual harassment in the workplace—even if those who came to espouse such views often prefaced their beliefs with the disclaimer, "I'm no women's libber, but . . . ."

Betty Friedan played a key role in the revival of the movement. A 1942 graduate of Smith College, Friedan retired from a decade-long career as a labor journalist to concentrate on raising her three children in the 1950s. But she kept up her writing on a freelance basis, mostly contributing to large-circulation women's magazines. At the end of the 1950s, on the occasion of the fiftieth reunion of her graduating class, she took a survey of her Smith classmates, measuring how they felt about their life's achievements. Nearly 90 percent of those who responded were housewives, and many confessed to feeling dissatisfied with their failure to make better use of their education. Few of them would have described themselves as feminists, but Friedan argued that their unhappiness stemmed from the unequal relations of men and women in American society. She began writing about these issues for women's magazines, and then in 1963 presented her conclusions in a book. The Feminist Mystique presented Friedan's life as representative of the unfair choices forced upon educated women in American society (to further her presentation of herself as a typical housewife, she downplayed her past history as a political radical). Friedan argued that "a sexual counterrevolution" had taken place in the 1950s, "a moratorium during which many millions of women put themselves on ice and stopped growing." They accepted the notion—or "mystique"—that the true glory of womanhood lay in the role of wife and mother, and nowhere else. The personal dissatisfaction she found so prevalent among
women her own age, and younger women as well, she called "the problem with no name," and argued its solution lay in allowing women the opportunity to find satisfying careers outside the home. The vision of the future that Friedan put forth in the conclusion of *The Feminine Mystique* was not, however, one of victory of women over men in some eternal battle of the sexes. Rather, just as in that same year Martin Luther King would call on white and black Americans alike to join together in harmonious re-creation of the American dream, so Friedan imagined the mutually enhanced lives of men and women in a new world of genuine sexual equality:

Who knows of the possibilities of love when men and women share not only children, home, and garden, not only the fulfillment of their biological roles, but the responsibilities and passions of the work that creates the human future and the full human knowledge of who they are?36

Friedan's feminist egalitarianism, like King's racial egalitarianism, struck a responsive chord among many Americans in the 1960s; *The Feminine Mystique* would go on to sell a million copies.

Thanks to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, sexual discrimination in employment was now against federal law. The newly created Equal
Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) was instructed to enforce the provisions against both sexual and racial discrimination. For a time, however, EEOC commissioners proved reluctant enforcers of the new rules as they applied to women. The notion of sexual discrimination in the workplace struck them, as it did most employers at the time, as trivial if not ludicrous. Were they supposed to be upset if a man couldn’t find employment as a Playboy bunny? Newspapers began referring to the anti-sexual discrimination provisions of Title VII as the “bunny law.”

But the women who had been involved in the work of the President’s Commission and various state commissions on the status of women were not amused. And they drew an important lesson from the recent history of the civil rights movement. Blacks had the NAACP and other groups to lobby for their interests; if American women expected the same respect and results, they clearly needed to develop equivalent organizational clout. Thus in 1966 a small group of female activists formed a new organization which, at Betty Friedan’s suggestion, took the name National Organization for Women (NOW). Most of the women initially involved were established professionals and, in the beginning, NOW’s preferred approach to women’s rights issues was through a combination of litigation and high-level insider lobbying. But younger women, many of them veterans of the civil rights or campus radical movements, soon joined up and pushed the organization leftward in political tactics, style, and issues.

During the 1960s, Richard Goodwin would write, “men and women [lived] as if their world was malleable to their grasp.” Goodwin’s experience of the decade mirrored that of many of the “Reform Democrats” who came out of the 1950s. By decade’s end, he had been both a liberal insider and a liberal outsider: a member of government and a member of a social movement outside of government. A speechwriter first for Kennedy and then for Johnson, he coined the phrase “Great Society” for which the Johnson administration would be most fondly remembered by subsequent generations of liberals. But in the later 1960s, Goodwin moved into opposition to the president he once served, joining the antiwar Democrats who sought to bring Johnson’s political career to an end.

Liberals helped change America in the 1960s, and during those years enjoyed the heady feeling of living in a world “malleable to their grasp.” But eras of reform and social change in American history are judged not simply by the achievements of their own time, but also by their political legacies. The legacy of Franklin Roosevelt’s years in office included a newly powerful trade union movement, representing the interests of millions of members in the halls of legislative power as well as in the workplace.

The political legacy of Lyndon Johnson’s years in office was more ambiguous. Liberalism, and with it, much of the Democratic Party, had been transformed by decade’s end. Although unions remained a powerful force in
the Democratic party (if less so every year in the workplace), they were no longer the source of the party's sense of its social mission. Liberals no longer shielded away from the idea of crusades and mass movements, as they had in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Nor was there any shortage of new movements with which they could ally themselves: powerful organizations promoting civil rights, civil liberties, environmentalism, and feminism, and a host of other worthy causes competed for their attention. If the stereotype of the typical liberal in the 1950s had been one of a tweedy, middle-aged male intellectual poring over the latest issue of *The New Republic* in a university library, by the late 1960s it had been replaced by that of an youthful and energetic man or woman, knocking on doors or buttonholing strangers on a street corner to collect signatures on a petition for the burning liberal cause of the moment. The egghead was dead; the activist triumphant.

Michael Harrington was one of the few activist intellectuals of the 1960s who sought to link the institutional legacies of the New Deal with the new social movements emerging in the era of the Great Society. He welcomed the advent of what he called the "conscience constituency" of middle-class liberal activists. But he did not think that the new liberals could change America by themselves. The "daily concerns of working people and the poor," he wrote in the waning days of the Johnson administration, "must merge with the values of the college-educated and the religiously inspired in a new majority party." 60

That merger Harrington called for never took place. To a large extent, it was never attempted, save briefly in such campaigns as the one in support of California farmworkers. The new liberalism remained largely a movement of, by, and for the educated middle classes. The consequences of that fact, for the future of the Great Society and for the future of American politics, would be profound. Within a very few years, the world would seem a much less "malleable" place to American liberals.
Presiding over the annual tree-lighting ceremony at the White House shortly before Christmas 1964, Lyndon Johnson was in a triumphant mood. "These are the most hopeful times," he proclaimed with characteristic expansiveness, "since Christ was born in Bethlehem." Veteran political reporter Kenneth Crawford tweaked the president a few weeks later in Newsweek for his fondness for hyperbole, but conceded there was ample cause for his optimism. Lyndon Johnson, Crawford wrote, was leader of "the most powerful, most prosperous, and most lavishly endowed nation not only of these times but of any times."2

A month earlier Johnson had been elected to the presidency by the largest plurality the American electorate had ever given any candidate for the White House. Johnson was given to insecurity, and in the first months after inheriting his office from Kennedy, he later confessed, he felt "illegitimate, a naked man with no presidential covering, a pretender to the throne, an illegal usurper."3 But after November 1964 his power was, in his own eyes, complete and legitimate; no longer need he sustain even the rhetorical pretense ("Let us continue") of merely being the humble successor to his martyred predecessor.

The nation that President Johnson had been chosen to lead was itself at a peak of self-confidence. When asked if they were "satisfied or dissatisfied with [their] family income," 64 percent of white respondents answered in the affirmative (compared, however, to only 30 percent of nonwhites).4 It seemed, at least to the white majority, that the country had arrived at a permanent plateau of prosperity. Since 1961 the volume of economic activity in the United States had increased by $100 billion, or over 25 percent. In May 1965 the United States would break the peacetime record for a business upswing. By year's end, the unemployment rate would drop below 4
percent, with no significant inflationary pressures yet visible on the economic horizon. Americans also felt confident about the role their nation played in the world. The United States, in the popular saying, had “never lost a war” (the ambiguous outcome of the war in Korea, a decade earlier, was generally passed over in silence). In the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis, when Khrushchev, not Kennedy, had been the first to blink at the prospect of nuclear apocalypse, earlier fears that the United States had fallen behind its Communist rival in military strength had faded away. In 1965 Johnson was commander-in-chief of armed forces that, in destructive power if not sheer numbers, dwarfed those of the Soviet Union, or for that matter, any force ever before assembled on the globe. Over 800 intercontinental ballistic missiles, 31 Polaris submarines, and nearly 1000 strategic bombers were available to deliver America’s nuclear arsenal in case of an all-out war. Fifteen attack carriers, and over 900 other U.S. naval vessels ceaselessly crisscrossed the world’s oceans. Nearly a million American soldiers and 200,000 Marines patrolled the front lines of potential battlegrounds from Germany to Korea (including about 23,000 “military advisers” in South Vietnam), or were held in reserve for rapid deployment from bases in the United States and its allies. In the heavens as on earth, American will power and technology were prevailing. Beginning with astronaut John Glenn’s orbital flight in February 1962, the United States had matched Soviet space achievements step by step.

President Lyndon Johnson and Lady Bird Johnson, the First Lady, at a “Salute to Congress,” October 1965. Source: Library of Congress
The Mercury space program, designed to put Americans in space, concluded after six successful launches; in the spring of 1965 the Gemini program began, featuring flights of longer duration, space walks, and docking maneuvers in space. Project Apollo, manned exploration of the moon, was soon to follow. The United States was well on its way to achieving Kennedy's promise of placing an American on the moon by the end of the decade.

The world was still seen as a dangerous place, full of snare for the unwary. But surely America's leaders, tested in decades of crisis and confrontation, could be relied upon to steer a steady course both abroad and at home. In a Gallup poll taken in February 1965, 64 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that this would prove a year when "America will increase her world power."7 Johnson campaigned in 1964 as the candidate of national prosperity and international peace, and American voters had taken him at his word on both counts. Walter Lippmann, the dean of Washington newspaper columnists, and a frequent critic of the government's Cold War policies, wrote on the occasion of Johnson's inaugural in January that, for the first time since the start of the Second World War, the United States had a president whose attention was "not fixed upon the danger abroad, but on the problems and prospects at home."8

WINTER: VIETNAM

Meanwhile, Americans continued to die in Vietnam. Five days before Lyndon Johnson's election victory, five Americans were killed and six B-57 bombers were destroyed in a Viet Cong mortar attack on Bienhoa Air Base, 20 miles northeast of Saigon. On the day before Christmas, two Americans were killed and 37 wounded when the Viet Cong dynamited a U.S. officers' billet in Saigon itself. By the end of 1964, 267 Americans had been killed in action in South Vietnam, well over half of them in the 13 months since Johnson took office.

Throughout the fall, Johnson pondered his options in Vietnam. The consensus among his advisers was that once the election was safely decided, the United States would need to act decisively to save the faltering Saigon regime from collapsing to the Communist onslaught. In early September Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton sent a memorandum to his boss, Robert McNamara, outlining a "scenario" for future U.S. actions in Vietnam. "[N]ew initiatives" should include a series of provocative actions against North Vietnam similar to those leading up to the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Assuming the North Vietnamese responded with new attacks of their own, the results would "provide good grounds for us to escalate if we wish" with a bombing campaign.9
In the Gulf of Tonkin incident, where no American lives had been lost, Johnson had hastily ordered retaliatory strikes. But as 1964 drew to a close, with more Americans dying every day in the war, the president hesitated on the brink of decisive action. When Maxwell Taylor, the American ambassador to South Vietnam, urged Johnson to hit back at North Vietnam for the bombing of the officers' billet in Saigon, he refused. “Every time I get a military recommendation,” the president complained in a cable to Taylor, “it seems to me that it calls for a large-scale bombing. I have never felt this war would be won from the air.”

The one usually reliable dissenter from the pro-escalation consensus in Johnson’s inner circle had been Undersecretary of State George Ball. Ball drafted a memorandum in October challenging the basic assumptions of American policy. American international credibility would suffer more for the irresponsible escalation of the war than from possible Communist gains in Southeast Asia. If the United States upped the ante in Vietnam, the Communists could respond by increasing their own attacks, which would require a still greater American commitment, with no end in sight. “Once on the tiger’s back,” Ball prophesied famously, “we cannot be sure of picking the place to dismount.”

Despite Ball’s prophecy, and Johnson’s end-of-the-year misgivings, the momentum for launching an air war against North Vietnam was proving irresistible in Washington. On January 14, Ambassador Taylor was instructed by the White House to be on the alert for any plausible excuse for the United States to step up military activity: “immediately following the occurrence of a spectacular enemy action,” he should “propose to us what reprisal action you considered desirable.” The necessary “spectacle” came along three weeks later at Pleiku, the site of a U.S. air base in the central highlands of South Vietnam, its airstrip crowded with military planes and helicopters. At 2 a.m. on February 7, the airstrip and a barracks a few miles away were hit simultaneously by Viet Cong mortar and ground attacks. In 15 minutes, eight Americans were killed, and more than a hundred wounded. “I've had enough of this,” Johnson declared in a meeting of his National Security Council.

Time was running out for any option short of a vastly expanded war. But even at this late hour, Johnson was hearing from other voices, urging caution. In a memo to the President in mid-February, Vice President Hubert Humphrey pointed out that most opposition to the war was coming from within the ranks of the Democratic Party, that there was no widespread public support for escalating the war, and that a wider war would undercut the chances for achieving the domestic goals of the Great Society. Johnson's landslide victory the previous November had given him the political capital he needed to get out of Vietnam. “Politically, it is always hard to cut losses,” Humphrey wrote to his boss. “But the Johnson Administration is in a stronger position to do so than any Administration in this century. 1965 is the year of minimum political risk for the
Johnson Administration. Indeed it is the first year when we can face the Vietnam problem without being preoccupied with the political repercussions from the Republican right." Johnson turned a deaf ear to Humphrey's plea, teaching Humphrey a hard lesson in the limits of permissible dissent within the administration; it would be another year before Johnson would allow the Vice President to take part in deliberations over policy in Vietnam.¹³

On February 7, fighter-bombers from the U.S. aircraft carriers Ranger, Coral Sea, and Hancock, stationed in the South China Sea, attacked military bases in North Vietnam. Unlike the Gulf of Tonkin incident, this was not going to be just a tit-for-tat reprisal. On February 13, the president authorized the start of Operation Rolling Thunder, a sustained bombing campaign of North Vietnam that was to last for over three years. Later President Richard Nixon would resume where Johnson had left off; before the Vietnam War ended, the United States would drop triple the amount of bombs on North Vietnam than were dropped by all sides in Europe, Asia, and Africa in the Second World War.¹⁴

"Wars generate their own momentum," former defense secretary McNamara would reflect with hindsight, "and follow the law of unanticipated consequences."¹⁵ As the winter of 1965 turned to spring and then summer, events in Vietnam bore out the wisdom of McNamara's maxim. At the start of the New Year, there may still have been time to turn back from a major war in Vietnam, but that time was fast running out. Johnson had been skeptical about the effects of bombing North Vietnam as he weighed his options in 1964. At best, he had hoped that attacking North Vietnam would give South Vietnamese forces a "breathing spell." But by the spring of 1965 he had persuaded himself that those attacks would be the solution to the war. He predicted to one associate in March that the bombing would force the North Vietnamese to settle the conflict within a year to 18 months.¹⁶ Bombing appealed to Johnson as a factor he could control, unlike, say, the battle-readiness of ARVN troops, or the stability of the coup-prone South Vietnamese government. He devoted many hours to fine-tuning the bombing campaign, deciding just which targets should be hit, how hard, and how often.

Escalation in the air was followed soon after by escalation on the ground. By the beginning of March Johnson agreed to the request from General William Westmoreland, commander of American forces in South Vietnam, for the dispatch of two battalions of U.S. Marines to protect the air base at Da Nang. On March 8, at 9:03 in the morning Vietnamese time, the Ninth Marine Expeditionary Brigade began wading ashore on the beaches north of Da Nang. Pentagon spokesman declared that the marines had been sent to South Vietnam with a strictly "limited mission" to relieve government forces guarding American air bases, thus allowing the South Vietnamese to carry the fight to the enemy.

Such talk may have briefly reassured anxious American civilians, but it was not taken seriously by anyone who knew President Johnson's thinking
on the war. The previous December, when Johnson expressed doubts over
the efficacy of air strikes, he was already leaning toward committing U.S.
ground forces to combat. "It seems to me," he told Ambassador Taylor, that
what was needed was "a larger and stronger use of rangers and special forces
and marines, or other, appropriate military strength on the ground and on
the scene. . . . Any recommendation that you or General Westmoreland take
in this sense will have immediate attention from me, although I know that
it may involve the acceptance of larger American sacrifices."17

Five days after the marines landed at Da Nang, General Westmoreland
asked for an additional 40,000 troops. Johnson, as he had earlier signaled,
was eager to fulfill such requests. By early April, Johnson had quietly au-
torized use of the marines for combat patrols. In late June Westmoreland
received an open-ended authorization to commit American forces to battle
whenever he deemed it necessary.

The days of Green Beret-style "counterinsurgency" were clearly waning,
as main line army and marine combat units arrived in force, with their full
accompaniment of tanks, trucks, helicopters, and heavy weapons. But just how
these forces were going to be used remained uncertain at first. It was mid-
1965 before military strategists developed the plan for fighting the ground
war that became known as "search and destroy."

In past wars, American troops had almost always seized territory and then
held it. In this war, rather than attempting to secure particular areas of coun-
tryside, General Westmoreland kept his troops continually on the move, seek-
ing out the Viet Cong in South Vietnam's forests, jungles, and mountain
ranges. Sometimes intelligence reports pinpointed the exact location of an
enemy unit. Then the fighter-bombers, helicopters gunships, and the big B-
52s from Guam or Thailand could pile on the enemy with bombs, rockets,
and napalm, followed by ground troops delivered by helicopter to landing
zones (LZs) nearby. But more often, soldiers and marines had to pull on their
packs and "hump the boonsies," seeking out contact with the enemy in the
back country. That was the "searching" part of search-and-destroy. When
contact was made, the troops could call in artillery, napalm strikes, and heli-
copter gunships. Afterward, the enemy bodies would be counted up and
compared to American casualties; if there were many of the former and few
of the latter, military dispatches would boast of a favorable "kill ratio," and
another victory would be chalked up. Killing the enemy was not the means
to tactical or strategic gain such as taking back this or that village or hilltop
from the enemy. Killing the enemy was an end in itself in a war of attrition.18

Vietnam was a war fought by young men. The average American in-
fantryman in Vietnam was just 19 years old (some were as young as 17),
compared to an average age of 26 for his Second World War counterpart.
The "baby boom" provided an abundant pool of new 18-year-olds to meet
the stepped-up monthly draft calls. And by relying on the younger draftees,
President Johnson could avoid calling up either the National Guard or military reserve units, potentially controversial steps that could raise further questions about the necessity of the war.\textsuperscript{19}

Search-and-destroy operations left many American soldiers and marines—the "grunts" as they called themselves—feeling that their role in the war had been reduced to the unheroic one of serving as bait for enemy attack. In a day of patrolling, an American unit might never actually sight an enemy soldier, and yet still suffer casualties from booby traps and snipers. Even if they found and engaged the enemy, they would have nothing to show at the end of the day except, perhaps, a favorable "kill ratio"—meaning that more Viet Cong and North Vietnamese were killed than Americans. When a firefight was over, the grunts returned to their base camps, and there was nothing to prevent the remaining enemy soldiers from moving right back up the mountain or into the jungle abandoned by the Americans.

In March 1965, as Johnson was taking the decisive steps to escalate the war in Vietnam, Assistant Secretary of Defense John McNaughton, the principal civilian war planner in the Defense Department, set down a list of "U.S. aims" to guide fellow policymakers in Washington. It is a revealing document, both for the reliance on statistical format favored by the "the best and the brightest" and because of the relative weights assigned to each war aim. The reason the United States had to stay the course in Vietnam, McNaughton argued was:

70\%—To avoid a humiliating U.S. defeat (to our reputation as guarantor)
20\%—To keep SVN [South Vietnam] . . . from Chinese hands.
10\%—To permit the people of SVN to enjoy a better freer way of life.\textsuperscript{20}

Determining the fate of South Vietnam, in other words, was unimportant in and of itself, except as the means by which the United States would establish its credibility in international affairs, its "reputation as guarantor." How great a price the United States was prepared to pay to that end would become the most important question in American politics for the remainder of the decade.

**SPRING: SELMA**

On the afternoon of March 7, the day before the marines waded ashore at Da Nang, another force was gathering for a battle of another sort halfway around the world in Selma, Alabama. Six hundred civil rights demonstrators, most of them local black citizens, assembled at Selma's Brown Chapel African Methodist-Episcopal Church. Late that afternoon they set out, arrayed in a long line two by two, following SCLC organizer Hosea Williams and SNCC's
national chairman, John Lewis, down Selma's main street to the Edmund Pettus Bridge, which spans the Alabama River. Their intention was to march across the bridge and from there on to the state capitol of Montgomery, 50 miles away. In Montgomery, they intended to protest the denial of voting rights to blacks in the South, as well as the violence that had been directed against civil rights demonstrators in Alabama since the start of SCLC's voting rights campaign in January.

Across the Edmund Pettus bridge, the would-be marchers were met by a force of Alabama state troopers, backed up by Dallas County Sheriff Jim Clark's mounted posse. Ordered to disperse, they silently held their ground, some kneeling to pray. Scarcely a minute after the order had been given, a phalanx of club-swinging and yelling troopers and posse members slammed into the column. As tear gas billowed across the scene, newspaper photographers and television news cameramen recorded the ensuing chaos. Men, women, and children were beaten to the ground with billy clubs, cattle prods, and bull whips; one posseman beat retreating marchers with a rubber hose wrapped with barbed wire. Some marchers were ridden down by horses; others jumped or were pushed from the bridge to the water below. John Lewis was struck on the side of the head with a billy club; he remembered thinking as he fell to the ground, "People are going to die here. I'm going to die here." Rebel yells could be heard over the screams of the beaten, as well as the voice of Sheriff Clark yelling "Get those god-damned niggers!"21 Dozens
of marchers, including Lewis, required hospitalization for concussions, lacerations, and broken bones. In the spring of 1965 the voting rights struggle in Selma provided the nation a tableau of violent conflict and redemptive suffering that would move President Johnson to compare its historical significance to the battles of Lexington and Concord.

Southern blacks had been kept from the voting booth since the late nineteenth century through a combination of legal subterfuge and open terror. In Alabama in 1965, fewer than one in five eligible blacks were registered to vote. In Dallas County, Alabama, where Selma was the county seat, the figures were even more dismal: of the 15,000 blacks of voting age (potentially half the county's total electorate), just over 300 were registered to vote.\(^{22}\)

In his State of the Union address in January, Johnson had called on the South to eliminate obstacles to black voting. However, he had no immediate plans to seek federal legislation guaranteeing voting rights. He had devoted the full force of his legendary political skills and energy to secure passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. But he feared that other legislative priorities, like Medicare and Medicaid, would be damaged by a divisive debate over a voting rights bill in 1965. According to Johnson's own political calculations, would-be black voters in the South were just going to have to wait—perhaps months, perhaps a year or longer—to gain access to the ballot box. As late as mid-February, the Justice Department's preferred remedy for voting rights abuses was to seek a constitutional amendment—a process requiring the ratification of two-thirds of the states as well as a two-thirds majority in both houses of Congress, something that could have taken years to achieve.\(^{23}\)

Martin Luther King, Jr., and other senior civil rights leaders were just as much political realists as Lyndon Johnson. They wanted Johnson to win a decisive victory over Barry Goldwater in the presidential election (since Goldwater had been one of only eight Republican senators to vote against the 1964 Civil Rights Act). The major civil rights organizations maintained an informal moratorium on demonstrations in the fall of 1964 to avoid any incident that might embarrass the president.

But civil rights leaders had their own priorities independent of Johnson's and made their own calculations. And in 1965, they felt the time for caution was over. King and other movement leaders needed to create the circumstances that would allow Johnson to transform his rhetorical commitment to their cause into legislative deeds. As they had learned in earlier civil rights campaigns, that meant creating a crisis that would dramatize the issue for a national audience.

Activists from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee had been trying to register voters in the city of Selma for several years, but despite mass arrests of would-be registrants, SNCC's efforts had gained little attention. Selma's prosperous years had come and gone a century earlier, when it had been an important cotton and slave trading center. Now, its 30,000
black and white residents lived in a political and economic backwater that one civil rights activist described as looking as if “a movie producer had re-
constructed a pre–Civil War Southern town,” complete with muddy streets and 
decaying buildings. Selma was significant only because the civil rights 
movement decided to make it so. As Martin Luther King explained when the 
SCLC launched its own voter registration campaign in early January 1965, 
the city had been chosen because it was “a symbol of bitter-end resistance to 
the civil rights movement in the Deep South.”

The personification of that bitter-end resistance was Sheriff Jim Clark: 
short-tempered, profane, and swaggering, he was every northern liberal’s 
worst nightmare of southern law enforcement. Selma’s more moderately 
inclined police chief, Wilson Baker, who hoped to contain the protests with 
out violence, referred to the members of Clark’s posse as “Ku-Klux-Klan 
type.” Not even the most optimistic of SCLC’s strategists believed that they 
would be able to persuade someone like Sheriff Clark of the righteousness of 
their cause. But if nonviolent persuasion was a lost cause in Selma, non-
violent provocation had real potential for a movement heavily dependent on me-
dia coverage to get its message out to a wider audience. The denial of voting 
rights was undramatic; no one would pay attention to pictures of people not 
voting. When Sheriff Clark and his deputies laid into the ranks of would-be 
voters with nightsticks and cattle prods, they turned abstract constitutional 
injustice into easily grasped moral outrage.

On the evening of January 2, SCLC opened its campaign in Selma with 
a mass rally at Brown Chapel. King was there to inspire the audience, and 
then flew off to other speaking engagements. He returned on January 18 to 
lead the first march of voting rights supporters to the Dallas County Cour-
thouse in downtown Selma. That day’s march passed peacefully. But the next 
day, as 50 would-be registrants again lined up outside the courthouse, Sheri-
iff Clark lost his cool—just as SCLC strategists had hoped he would. He 
roughly arrested one of the local protest leaders, Mrs. Amelia Boynton, while 
photographers recorded the scene for the national press. In the weeks that 
followed, the volatile Clark repeatedly managed to get his face on the front 
page of northern newspapers and on evening television broadcasts, as he beat 
protesters into submission with his nightstick and punched black ministers 
in the face. King himself was arrested in a mass demonstration on Monday, 
February 1; by the end of the week when he was bailed out, more than 3000 
demonstrators were being held in jails in Dallas County.

On February 18, the violence escalated in neighboring Lowndes County, 
where SNCC and SCLC were also conducting protests, as a young black man 
named Jimmie Lee Jackson was mortally wounded by a state trooper for try-
ing to shield his mother from being beaten at a voting rights rally. SCLC 
strategists decided, in response, to escalate their own campaign by marching 
from Selma to Montgomery. They sought to lay responsibility for the vio-
ience in Dallas and Lowndes counties at the doorstep of Alabama governor George Wallace.

Sheriff Clark and his troopers easily won the resulting battle of “Bloody Sunday,” March 7, but, in doing so, lost the war. ABC News interrupted the network’s Sunday night movie, the premiere showing on television of Judgement at Nuremburg (a movie about bringing to justice the Nazis guilty of war crimes in World War II), to show 15 minutes of raw and dramatic footage from the attack on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. In the days that followed, fresh volunteers poured into Selma to join the struggle. A new march, this time led by Martin Luther King, headed down to cross the now-famous bridge over the Alabama River on March 9, but King turned the marchers around when they reached it, unwilling to defy a federal court order temporarily banning the attempt. One of the newly arrived volunteers who marched that day was a white Unitarian minister from Boston named James Reeb. That evening, after eating a meal in a black restaurant in Selma, he and two other white ministers were set upon by four local whites, who called out at them “Hey, you nigger!” Reeb was struck in the back of the head with a wooden club, and he fell senseless to the ground. He died the next day of his injuries. (His accused assailant was acquitted by an all-white jury nine months later.)

This new martyrdom further inflamed northern opinion. As the president sent flowers to Reeb’s widow and four children, picketers marched outside the White House and in dozens of northern cities demanding federal action. On the floor of Congress, speakers compared Alabama governor George Wallace to Hitler, and Sheriff Clark’s posse to Nazi storm troopers. President Johnson met with Wallace in the White House on March 13, urging the Alabama governor to protect the civil rights protesters from further attack. Johnson pleaded with Wallace to stop “looking back to 1865.” And then, in his thickest southern accent and with calculated eloquence, the president demanded of the governor:

What do you want left after you when you die? Do you want a Great... Big... Marble monument that reads, “George Wallace—He Built”?... Or do you want a little piece of scrumy pine board lying across that harsh, caliche soil, that reads, “George Wallace—He Hated”?

Three hours later, having been given the full Johnson treatment, an unusually subdued Wallace confided to an aide, “Hell, if I’d stayed there much longer, he’d have had me coming out for civil rights.”

On the evening of March 15, Johnson went on television to address the nation. To an audience estimated at 70 million, the president declared that the events in Selma were not a “Negro problem” or even a “southern problem” but an “American problem.” It was “deadly wrong,” he said, for “any of your fellow Americans” to be denied the right to vote. He announced his intention to bring a voting rights bill to Congress in the next 48 hours. Mar-
tin Luther King, who was in Selma watching the speech on television in the home of a movement sympathizer, wept when he heard Johnson’s concluding line, with its deliberate echo of the civil rights movement’s anthem, “And... we... shall... overcome.”

With legal obstacles swept aside, and with President Johnson federalizing the Alabama National Guard to provide protection from further attack, SCLC again prepared to march on Montgomery. On Sunday, March 21, King led 3,000 marchers across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. By prearrangement with the authorities, 300 marchers made the entire 54-mile march through Lowndes County to Montgomery County, their numbers swelled upon arrival in Montgomery by thousands of other supporters.

The SCLC rally in Montgomery on March 25 was, in many ways, the culmination of the civil rights movement. Ten years earlier, Montgomery had witnessed the birth of the movement when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on one of the city buses. Martin Luther King had risen to national leadership as a result of the ensuing bus boycott. When the movement set out, 10 years earlier, few Americans outside the black community were concerned with the century-long denial of equal rights to black citizens. But by the spring of 1965 Gallup polls showed that 52 percent of American identified civil rights as the “most important problem” confronting the nation, and an astonishing 75 percent of respondents favored federal voting rights legislation.

Montgomery had served as the Confederacy’s first capital in 1861. The Confederate battle flag was displayed more prominently in the city than the American flag; even the Alabama national guardsmen who were there to protect the marchers wore metallic badges on their uniforms displaying the emblem of the southern rebellion.

Not since Reconstruction a century earlier had so many northern civilians, white and black, set off as volunteers in the effort to remake southern society. They came by car and plane to Montgomery, to join with thousands of black Alabamians. Twenty-five thousand people in all marched through Montgomery that day, passing Martin Luther King’s old church on Dexter Avenue en route. “Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on,” they sang as they marched. Montgomery’s black citizens lined the streets and cheered or joined the march themselves; Montgomery’s white citizens were nowhere to be seen.

The marchers gathered for their rally before the steps of the state capitol building, the same site where just over two years earlier Governor Wallace, in his inaugural address, had vowed “Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!” But on this day in Montgomery Wallace was nowhere to be seen; he peeped out at the crowd from behind closed shades in his office. This was Martin Luther King’s day, and in his speech to the gathered throng, he predicted that the sacrifices of civil rights activists would lead the nation to redemption, and in not so distant future. “How long?” he asked. “Not long. Because the arm of the moral universe is long, but it
bends towards justice.” And then he ended with the words of the Civil War anthem, The Battle Hymn of the Republic:

How long? Not long, because mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord, trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. He has loosed the faithful lighting of his terrible swift sword. His truth is marching on. Glory hallelujah! Glory hallelujah.34

Michael Harrington, author of The Other America, was one of the northerners who had traveled to Montgomery for the rally. He reported afterwards how stirring it had felt to stand before the capitol building, where the Confederate stars and bars flapped in the breeze, while the U.S. flag was nowhere to be seen. When the crowd began to sing “The Star Spangled Banner,” he said, it sounded “like a revolutionary anthem.”35

Congressional passage of the Voting Rights Act was now a certainty, but not before its opponents claimed one more victim. Mrs. Viola Liuzzo, a Detroit housewife, had been helping to shuttle demonstrators back to Selma from Montgomery after the rally, when she was killed by Klansmen who fired into her car on Highway 80. On August 6, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law in the room adjoining the Senate chamber where President Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Within days, the first of the South’s 2.5 million previously disenfranchised eligible blacks were lining up to register to vote under the watchful eyes of federal officials at county courthouses in Alabama and five other states in the Deep South. In two months the number of black voters in Dallas County, Alabama, jumped from barely 300 to nearly 7000. By the next presidential election, over half of Alabama blacks were on the voting lists.36

SUMMER: WATTS

Johnson understood that there were political risks involved in linking his administration and the Democratic Party to the cause of equal rights for black Americans. After signing the civil rights act of 1964, he reportedly remarked to aide Bill Moyers that he had just “delivered the South to the Republican Party for a long time to come.”37 And, in the election that followed, he did lose five previously loyal southern states to the Republicans. There had also been glimmers of what was coming to be called in the north “white backlash,” in the votes that Governor George Wallace attracted in the Democratic presidential primaries in states like Wisconsin and Indiana. But in the end those voters, most of them working-class whites and longtime Democrats, had cast their ballots for Johnson rather than Goldwater in November, and
the Democrats had strengthened, not weakened their hold on Congress. Not a single congressman who had voted in favor of the civil rights bill was defeated in his bid for reelection; on the other hand, half of the 22 northern Congressmen who voted against it had gone down to defeat in November 1964. So there was hope as well as risk in the Democratic Party's new commitment to securing civil rights for southern blacks. If large numbers of blacks were enabled to vote in the South, and if the Democrats could retain their support among whites in the rest of the country (as they had in 1964), and if a certain percentage of southern whites (particularly those in lower income groups) could be persuaded that they had interests in common with newly enfranchised southern blacks, then the result would be a strengthened Democratic majority coalition. When Michael Harrington returned from Montgomery in March, he predicted that the coalition of civil rights supporters, clergy of all religions, liberals, and trade unionists who had assembled there to challenge white supremacy represented "a new Populism," and "the human potential for a new American majority." It was a political gamble, but it seemed a reasonable one, until August 11, just five days after the signing of the Voting Rights Act, when rioting broke out in the black community of Watts in Los Angeles. Watts was a neighborhood of single-family detached houses that to many outsiders did not look like a "slum" at all. But it had all the problems of more congested

President Lyndon Johnson hands one of the pens used to sign the Voting Rights Act to the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. in August 1965. Source: Library of Congress
urban neighborhoods, including poor schools, high unemployment, and a high crime rate that included a growing drug-abuse problem. When a white California highway patrol officer arrested a drunk black driver who resisted arrest, the incident sparked rumors in the black community that police had also, and without provocation, beaten a black taxi driver and a pregnant woman. Bands of teenagers, chanting “Burn, baby, burn!” began to throw stones at police, and at cars driven by whites. When the police failed to restore order that night, looting and arson followed. There was an air of desperation but also insurrectionary bravado in the disorders. “These fucking cops,” one of the young rioters declared, “have been pushin’ me ‘round all my life. Kickin’ my ass and things like that. Whitey ain’t no good. He talked ‘bout law and order, it’s his law and his order, it ain’t mine.”

Five days later, when a force of 16,000 police, highway patrol officers, and National Guardsmen had managed to bring the riot to an end, 34 people were dead, a thousand injured, and four thousand in jail. Property damage was estimated at $40 million, with over 250 buildings burned down. Time magazine compared the scenes in Los Angeles streets that week to those in “embattled Saigon.”

President Johnson was so appalled by the political implications of the rioting for his party’s political future that, according to political aide Joseph Califano, “he refused to look at the cables from Los Angeles.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. was also horrified. He flew to Los Angeles soon after the rioting ended and walked through the smoldering ruins of Watts. Less than three months earlier he had marched in triumph through the streets of Montgomery. Now he found himself heckled by young black militants, who accused him of being a sell-out “Uncle Tom” for suggesting that they had anything to atone for in taking on the police in the streets of Watts. For the younger generation in the black community, Watts was something of which they were proud. As political scientist Edward Banfield noted a few years later with dismay, they regarded it as “a kind of black Bunker Hill.”

As one young veteran of that summer’s fighting in Watts proclaimed, “if I’ve got to die, I ain’t dying in Vietnam, I’m going to die here.”

FALL: LIBERTY ISLAND

The escalation of the war in Vietnam in the spring of 1965 and the outbreak of racial warfare in America’s central cities in the summer, dimmed the prospects for President Johnson’s Great Society but did not immediately halt the momentum for legislative reform. On a bright windy day in early October in New York harbor, President Johnson stood before the Statue of Liberty and explained his reasons for signing the most significant immigration law to be passed since the 1920s. The act, Johnson declared, “repairs a deep
and painful flaw in the fabric of American justice. It will make us truer to ourselves as a country and as a people. Cheers rang out from an audience made up of powerful politicians as well as hundreds of ordinary New Yorkers, transported to Liberty Island for the day to symbolize and celebrate the city's ethnic potpourri.

The 1965 Immigration Act reversed a policy that intentionally discriminated against people who harked from anywhere in the world other than western and northern Europe. In the mid-1920s, Congress had established a quota system for prospective newcomers with the candid purpose of fixing the ethnic composition of the nation at its current percentages, lest white Protestants suffer what some alarmists were calling "race suicide." Among those applauding the passage of the discriminatory legislation was the Ku Klux Klan, which then boasted millions of members in the North and Midwest as well as in the South.

Under the 1924 quotas, a few nations—Germany, England, and Ireland in particular—could send generous numbers of immigrants, while only a trickle of people from eastern and southern Europe could enter. Asians were almost completely barred. Most members of Congress believed that racial and ethnic background was the best predictor of who would make a good citizen. Doctor Harry N. Laughlin, a prominent spokesman for immigration restriction, criticized Americans for being "so imbued with the idea of democracy... that we have left out of consideration the matter of blood or natural born hereditary and moral differences." No one who understood the value of "pedigreed plants and animals" would neglect the importance of the right sort of heredity in breeding future Americans.

Emmanuel Celler, then a freshman congressman from a Brooklyn district full of immigrants and their offspring, found such reasoning repugnant. A Jewish graduate of Columbia Law School, Celler spoke out against theories of ethnic and racial supremacy, insisting that one's national origins had nothing to do with the making of a good American. Routinely reelected over the next 40 years, he kept fighting to repeal the quotas, but complained that his efforts "were about as useless as trying to make a tiger eat grass or a cow eat meat."

Finally, in 1965, during his fifth decade as a congressman, the 73-year-old Celler was able to do something about it. As chair of the House Judiciary Committee in a congress dominated by liberal Democrats, Celler oversaw the drafting of the new law and helped win big margins for it in both houses.

Not by accident did Celler manage to achieve his decades-old goal in the same year that Congress passed the Voting Rights Act. The framers of the new act sought to extend the principles of equal rights to immigration policy. Henceforth, first preference in admitting new immigrants would be given to the immediate relatives of American citizens, without regard to race or ethnicity. Then foreigners who possessed desirable skills—professionals, artists, and scientists—moved to the front of the list. Celler's bill was not
strictly egalitarian (poor and uneducated applicants without family ties lost out), but it did abolish the quota system with its implied hierarchy of racial and ethnic desirability. The entire Eastern Hemisphere—Europe, Africa, and Asia included—could now send 170,000 persons a year as immigrants, with no more than 20,000 coming from any single country. A qualified Nigerian was now, officially, just as welcome in the United States as an equally qualified Norwegian. Western Hemisphere countries could send an additional 120,000 people a year.

For all their good intentions, the framers of the 1965 Immigration Act had left the door open to a flood of undocumented newcomers. The new total limit of 250,000 immigrants was actually lower than that allowed under the old, discriminatory policy; this was partly the result of pressure from labor unions who feared a mass influx of new workers. In addition, the quota of 20,000 per nation was skewed in favor of migrants from less populous nations. Most important, Mexicans and Central Americans had never faced a quota before. In years to come, their lower standard of living and proximity to the U.S. border would bring a huge increase in illegal immigration—which Congress failed either to stem or to resolve.

But at its signing, the Immigration Act provoked surprisingly little controversy for such a dramatic shift in policy. Outside the Deep South, few politicians would now go on record espousing the view that any nation or race's heredity was inferior to any other's. And it was even less appealing to lawmakers to stand up in opposition to the principle that parents should have the right to join their children and wives to live with their husbands in America. President Johnson shrewdly capitalized on this aspect of the immigration act by presenting it as the fulfillment of, rather than a challenge to, America's best traditions. In his speech at the Statue of Liberty, President Johnson extended a special invitation to Cubans with family members in the United States to emigrate to Miami, where a large number of their compatriots, refugees from Castro's revolution, already resided. "I declare to the people of Cuba that those who seek refuge here will find it," Johnson announced. "The dedication of America to our traditions as an asylum for the oppressed will be upheld."

But the legislation signed at Liberty Island that day would change the nation more than its supporters imagined. Within a few years, the number of newcomers from Asia skyrocketed, with Chinese, Koreans, Indians, and Vietnamese leading the way. Millions more came from Central and South America—many of them openly, but just as many taking advantage of the country's porous borders to enter as "illegals." By 1990, more than four out of five immigrants to the United States began their journeys in Asia or Latin America.

Just like nineteenth-century immigrants, the new immigrants came for a variety of reasons, from economic opportunity to religious and political free-
America Divided

dom to consumer bounty. But the new immigrants were often less likely than the old to pay even lip service to the once-cherished ideal of America as “melting pot.” In the 1800s and early 1900s, despite the arrival of millions of immigrants, the cultural dominance of white Protestants of Anglo-Saxon descent was never in serious jeopardy, whatever hysterical nativists might have chosen to believe. A rapid assimilation into American society was widely if not universally assumed by newcomers and old-line Americans alike to offer the shortest and most appropriate route to success and security in the New World. While remaining faithful to traditional religious beliefs and familiar cuisines, most immigrants proved eager to learn English, to put aside those customs, costumes, and behaviors that marked them off as exotic strangers (except perhaps on ceremonial occasions), to have their children and grandchildren be accepted as “one hundred percent Americans.” But the new immigrants who arrived after 1965 found themselves in a country where long-established but still marginal groups like blacks and Hispanics were questioning the values and superiority of the “dominant culture,” and asserting the right to redefine American identity to fit more comfortably with their own customs, beliefs, and past histories. In the decades that followed the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act, the United States became the most ethnically diverse society in the world. But the 1965 act also planted the seeds of future conflicts over what it meant to be an American.

CHRISTMAS: HOMECOMINGS

As the holidays approached in the late fall of 1965, Americans got their first inklings of the true costs of the war in Vietnam. A week before Thanksgiving several hundred soldiers from the American First Cavalry were surrounded and for a time cut off by North Vietnamese regulars in a place called the Ia Drang Valley in the central highlands of South Vietnam. Over the next few days 24 Americans were killed in the battle, often in hand-to-hand combat. Enemy dead were estimated at over 1300, leading General Westmoreland to hail this first major encounter between Americans and North Vietnamese as an unqualified victory. He then promptly cabled Washington, asking that an additional 200,000 American troops be sent to Vietnam in 1966.

The North Vietnamese also counted the battle of the Ia Drang as a victory. They had chosen where, when, and how long to fight, and they had held their own on the battlefield, notwithstanding the superior firepower of the Americans. If their casualties were high, they had learned invaluable tactical lessons, particularly the importance of what they called “clinging to the belt” of the Americans—fighting at such close quarters that it made it difficult for U.S. artillery and aircraft to provide effective tactical support (several of the
American soldiers who died in the battle were burned to death by U.S. Air Force napalm drops. Secretary of Defense McNamara came to Vietnam on one of his fact-finding missions in late November and was briefed by Colonel Hal Moore, the American battlefield commander in the Ia Drang. He listened in silence and asked no questions. Shortly afterward, as he prepared to return to the United States, he told reporters, “It will be a long war.”

Most Americans still described themselves in public opinion polls as optimistic about eventual victory in Vietnam. But few could have believed that “the boys” were coming home anytime soon, and certainly not by Christmas. As the year drew to an end, the American press and television news were filled with stories of how the troops would be celebrating the season in Vietnam. Plane loads of celebrities, entertainers, and clergy descended upon Tan Son Nhut airport in Saigon to spend the holidays with them. Bob Hope told jokes and Cardinal Spellman said prayers. Every American serviceman in South Vietnam was promised a hot turkey dinner on Christmas Day, even if he was serving in the most isolated and dangerous outpost.

In Washington, D.C., as befitted a wartime Christmas, the annual White House tree-lighting ceremony in mid-December was kept low key. The president had spent much of the fall convalescing in Texas after his gall-bladder operation. The incision from the surgery continued to cause him discomfort, and he was eager to return home to the comforts of his ranch in Johnson City.

There was another Texas homecoming of a different sort that Christmas for Sergeant First Class L.C. Block of the U.S. Army's famed First Infantry Division (the “Big Red One”). Block, 35 years old, a 17-year veteran of the military, and the father of six, had shipped out for Vietnam with his unit in September. He died in action on November 23, one of the first of the over 20,000 casualties that the First Division would suffer in Vietnam over the next five years. By the time Sergeant Block’s body was shipped home to Texas for his funeral, it was already mid-December. Sergeant Block was an African American, and although the U.S. military was now largely integrated, the funeral parlor in his hometown of Hemphill, Texas, was not. His wake had to be held at another undertaking establishment 20 miles away from the cemetery where he was finally laid to rest. On the day after the funeral the widow sat at home with her youngest child on her lap, reading and rereading the last letter Sergeant Block had sent home from Vietnam. “People wonder and ponder what the war is for,” Mrs. Block remarked quietly and thoughtfully to a reporter. “They wonder what it mean. I don’t know. I guess it’s necessary. L.C. died for his country, I guess.”
Chapter 8

The Making of a Youth Culture

I HAVE MY FREEDOM, BUT I DON'T HAVE MUCH TIME.
—The Rolling Stones

In October 1955, an announcement of a poetry reading circulated around the North Beach neighborhood of San Francisco. "Remarkable collection of angels all gathered at once in the same spot," it promised. "Wine, music, dancing girls, serious poetry, free satori. Small collection for wine and postcards. Charming event." The venue was the Six Gallery, a converted auto-repair shop.

The reading and the whimsical notice were the creation of 29-year-old writer Allen Ginsberg. During the previous decade, Ginsberg's life had wildly diverged from values most Americans held dear. A Jew and a homosexual, he entered Columbia University in 1944 on scholarship. Within months, he was suspended for writing an obscenity on his dirty dormitory window to irk a careless cleaning lady. Then he got arrested for letting a poetic drifter named Herbert Huncke hide stolen goods in his apartment. To avoid jail, Ginsberg agreed to spend several months in a psychiatric hospital. There, he and a fellow patient feigned insanity by smashing down the keys of a piano while screaming at the top of their lungs.

Ginsberg was an exceedingly generous soul. He delighted in sharing his poetic visions, his semen, and a variety of mind-altering drugs with an ever-expanding number of male writers—including erstwhile college football player Jack Kerouac, who later published the autobiographical novel On the Road. Ginsberg also read deeply in the sacred texts of Zen Buddhism and became a lifelong devotee (which explains his reference to satori—Japanese for "a state of enlightenment").

With little money, the young poet worked at odd jobs and slept on borrowed beds in various Manhattan apartments belonging to his friends. Ginsberg also found time to travel around the continent. In Mexico, he marveled at intricate temple ruins,ook long hikes wearing nothing but shoes, built a
set of wooden drums that he played at all hours, and harvested cocoa beans alongside Mayan Indians. He hitchhiked to Florida, flew to Cuba in expectation of orgies that did not occur, and then returned to Greenwich Village.

By the time he arrived in the San Francisco Bay Area in the mid-'50s, Ginsberg was at the center of a small but growing band of young artists and erotic adventurers one of them dubbed the Beat Generation. “Beat” was Jack Kerouac’s term; in half-serious tribute to his Catholic upbringing, he claimed it was short for “beatitude.” By 1955 a few articles about the group had appeared in newspapers and small magazines. But most Americans were quite unaware of their outrageous escapades and unorthodox spiritual quests. That would change after Ginsberg’s performance at the Six Gallery.

Ginsberg was nervous as he stepped to the front of the small stage to recite a long poem entitled, simply, “Howl.” He had never read poetry in public before and had bolstered himself with many glasses of cheap wine. But almost immediately, his exuberance began to flow:
I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,
starving hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through negro streets at dawn looking for an
angry fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection
to the starry dynamo in the machinery of light . . .

From that opening to the poem's last lines—"in my dreams you walk
dripping from a sea-journey on the highway across America in tears to the
door of my cottage in the Western night"—Ginsberg swirled together
candid glimpses of his own life with laments about the damage American
culture had done to maverick souls. Ginsberg's name for that culture was
"Moloch," a Semitic deity who gobbled up children. As the crowd whooped
and Kerouac yelled "Go" from a corner of the stage, Ginsberg chanted a
series of rapid portraits of the (mostly unnamed) "best minds" on their
wild ride of the past decade: "who got busted in their pubic beards
returning through Laredo with a belt of marijuana for New York . . . or pur-
gatoried their torsos night after night with dreams, with drugs, with waking
nightmares, alcohol and cock and endless balls." In the face of sexual
repression and Cold War hysteria, he and his friends had emerged,
strangely triumphant.

That evening at the Six Gallery was a declaration of independence from
the rigid, authoritarian order the Beats believed was throttling the nation. It
enabled the Beats to create themselves as icon-smashing legends. Rebel drama-
tist Michael McClure later wrote, "In all our memories no one had been so
outspoken in poetry before—we had gone beyond a point of no return—and
we were ready for it . . . None of us wanted to go back to the gray, chill,
militaristic silence . . . to the spiritual drabness." "Howl" was indeed a protest
against social evils. But Ginsberg drew no distinction between those who re-
sisted Moloch by letting "themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motor-
cyclists" and other sorts of heretics who handed out "Supercommunist pam-
phlets in Union Square," mecca of a once-influential American left. Surviving
on one's own terms was rebellious enough.

Some powerful San Franciscans clearly agreed. In May 1957, vice-
seeking local police arrested Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the publisher of Howl and
Other Poems, at his North Beach bookstore where the book was sold. The
trial was reported around the world; it ended in acquittal. In his decision,
the presiding judge hewed to the standard for obscenity recently laid down
by the Supreme Court; "Howl," ruled the judge, was not "entirely lacking in
social importance."

Legal controversy proved a splendid form of advertising. Ginsberg's brief
volume sold well over 100,000 copies during the next few years. In 1966, the
Supreme Court, in the case of *Redrup v. New York*, essentially abandoned its role as moral guardian of the arts. Liberal intellectuals argued that censorship could backfire, encouraging the victims of repression to seek “unhealthy” sexual outlets.5

The Beats helped to plant seeds that would sprout, luxuriantly, during the 1960s and after. One was a desire for sexual adventure, untethered to the values of monogamy and heterosexuality that had reigned supreme in the Western world since the dawn of Christianity. Another was glorification of the outlaw spirit, as embodied in men and women who viewed conventional jobs and sanitized entertainment as akin to a living death. Millions of young people would act out such beliefs with the aid of illegal drugs like marijuana, peyote, and especially LSD. The Beats also generated a romantic yearning for “authentic” experiences, which they associated with poor and working-class people, black and white and Latino. The cultural downscaling of middle-class white youths would take place most energetically through the mushrooming medium of rock ‘n’ roll.

The congregation of Beats also helped generate a new burst of spirituality—at once more personal, eclectic, and fervent than the kind found in most churches and synagogues. Seeking alternative routes to the transcendent, many Americans explored aspects of the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, and invented their own recombinant faiths. Finally, “Howl” proclaimed the perilous beauty of small, beloved communities composed of rebels loyal to no one but each other and bound by a common vision of hedonistic liberation. To belong to such a fellowship was to believe that one grasped the cause of all contemporary miseries and, perhaps, possessed the key to healing them.

Such notions flowered among members of a generation whose dreams seemed unlimited. Familiar with a world of mass consumption, many middle-class white baby boomers believed that an era of perpetual affluence and total freedom of choice was at hand. They were eager, at least for a few years, to forego the quest for economic security and its material tokens that had driven their elders. By the early ’60s, youth communities had sprung up on the outskirts of college campuses, often in cheap housing available near black or Latino ghettos. South Campus in Berkeley, Mifflin Street in Madison, Wisconsin, and the neighborhood behind the Drag in Austin, Texas, were among the more famous of such venues. Surrounded by one’s peers and largely free from the responsibilities of career, family, and mortgage, young people could experiment with their bodies and minds in ways that usually shocked and enraged older people raised amid the constricted horizons of the Great Depression and World War II.

At the same time, the “generation gap” was often a matter of differences more stylistic than ideological. Cultural rebels were acting out a vision of individual fulfillment as old as the free market and the Protestant Reformation. “To dance beneath the diamond sky with one hand waving free,” sang Bob
Dylan, who, as a teenager, read Ginsberg's poetry and later became his friend. Young people who consumed psychedelic ("mind-revealing") drugs and attended rock concerts grumbled about big corporations and the welfare state, but had little notion of what might replace them.

However, their taste in clothes and hairstyles proclaimed a clear desire to break with how successful people presented themselves in "straight" society. In the embryonic counterculture, both men and women tended to wear their hair long and untouched by creams or sprays. Most preferred secondhand clothing to new garb. Ubiquitous were castoffs from the world of hard, manual labor: blue workshirts, farmers' overalls, boots designed for the building trades, and peacoats and woolen bell-bottom pants manufactured for sailors on the high seas. Many cultural rebels also sported bits and pieces of Army, Navy, and Marine uniforms, in an ironic tribute to the military machine they loathed. Yet, the young also sported a riot of colors, sometimes in embroidered patches and elaborate patterns of beads and buttons. The antifashionable had become fashionable; to call someone a "freak" was to complement their appearance.

Meanwhile, some of the nation's biggest corporations quickly learned to tap the generation gap with slogans like Pepsi's ("For those who think young") and low-slung, fast cars like the Ford Mustang. "To be young is to be with it," remarked a business journalist in 1968. "Youth is getting the hard sell." Advertising agencies, filled with people who considered themselves hip and creative, churned out commercials that made fun of conformity, snobs, and the very products they were selling. "Moloch" proved to be a most accommodating fellow.

Still, there was a rebellious edge to the youth culture of the 1960s that retains its capacity to fascinate some Americans and to repel others. What was fresh and daring about the phenomenon always intermingled with its tendency to equate freedom with bigger and better thrills. Many young people combined the breaking of taboos with an effortless shift in consumer habits. Others followed the Beats in exalting the former and scorning the latter. Inevitably, the persistent hierarchy of wealth, race, and status framed one's opinions and cultural options. The lifestyle of a white suburbanite who attended Harvard or MIT mixed uneasily with that of a black youth from across the river in Roxbury who, after a few years of high school and a few weeks of boot camp, was likely to end up in Vietnam.

One way to understand this complex, but seldom boring, phenomenon is to focus on sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll—the triad that became a clichéd marker for the entire popular culture of the young. That daring experiences could so rapidly turn into commonplace ones helps reveal how much changed during those years—and why many Americans feared and resisted the cultural transformation.

What was the "sexual revolution" of the 1960s? Most significantly, it was an insurgency rooted in the conviction that the erotic should be celebrated
as an utterly normal part of life. Thus, Hugh Hefner's *Playboy* magazine helped legitimate the mass marketing of female nudity—by coupling abundant photos of young women (accompanying text stressed their wholesome values and career ambitions) to a “philosophy” that equated multiple sex partners with the drinking of good liquor and the wearing of sleek clothes. Thus, popular comedian Lenny Bruce mocked censors who had no problem with violence in films but forbid any depiction of sexual intercourse (which Bruce, a Jew, called *schtupping*—Yiddish slang—to avoid trouble with the police): “Well, for kids to watch killing—Yes; but schtupping—No! Cause if they watch *schutz* pictures, they may do it some day.” Thus, high school girls screamed orgasmically at the very sight of Elvis Presley and the Beatles. Some ran *en masse* after their idols and tore away bits of their clothing. Thus, Helen Gurley Brown, in her 1962 best-seller *Sex and the Single Girl*, encouraged her typical reader to have sex whenever “her body wants to” and then turned *Cosmopolitan* magazine into a vigorously irreverent manual for “swinging chicks.” Thus, many gay men and lesbians rejected their burdens of self-hatred and “came out” to friends, families, and coworkers.

The most avid participants in all this were in their teens and twenties, the age of sexual awakening. Millions of the young abandoned old strictures against premarital intercourse, oral sex, and candid public discussion of all aspects of lovemaking. In the “underground” newspapers that proliferated in youth communities, one could find guilt-free narratives of erotic experiences and personal ads that either offered or requested partners of every conceivable persuasion. Sweeping changes in technology and the law lessened the fear of pregnancy. The birth control pill, first available in 1960, and the spread of legal abortions in a number of states, gave young women, for the first time, options they themselves could control—although, at first the pill was used mainly by married women.

Higher education was in the front line of the sexual “revolution.” Gradually over the course of the ’60s, students pressured college authorities, who had traditionally acted as surrogate parents, to stop policing their carnal lives. Attacked first and most successfully were “partietal” rules that strictly limited the hours when men could visit women in their dormitory rooms and vice versa. Administrators were more reluctant to acquiesce to off-campus cohabitation. In 1968 Barnard College disciplined a student named Linda LeClair for lying about the fact that she was living with her boyfriend. Hundreds of her fellow students, as well as many faculty members, protested the decision. In the end, college officials meted out a rather strange “punishment”: LeClair was barred from the Barnard cafeteria.10

Such rebellious behavior occurred not only in such cosmopolitan meccas as New York City and San Francisco, but wherever large numbers of young people gathered. In Lawrence, Kansas—home of the state university—doctors dispensed birth control pills for free to women who could not afford them. The
local underground newspaper published photos of naked couples, and, at Lawrence High School, editors of the Students Free Press drew the ire of state legislators for emblazoning the word “fuck” across its cover. In response, people wrote from all Kansas to request a copy of the issue.  

Those who argued the cause of sexual liberty in the 60s could cite some well-known studies in their defense. The most prominent of these was the Kinsey Report, two thick volumes of interviews with some 18,000 white adults about their sexual practices. The report—a volume on men published in 1948 and one on women in 1953—exploded the myth of a puritanical America. Over a third of the men told biologist Alfred Kinsey and his team of researchers that they had achieved orgasm via a homosexual act, while a large majority admitted to premarital intercourse, often with a prostitute. Over half the women confessed to sexual activity before marriage; most, like the men, said they masturbated regularly when no partner was available. The gulf between the public morality of Americans and their private pleasures was hard to ignore. In a golden age of social science, the Kinsey Report set a new standard for sexual realism. 

But critics quickly pointed out that Kinsey and his associates were trafficking in secondhand knowledge. The researchers made no attempt to judge whether people had told them the truth. That was not a problem for Dr. William Masters and his coworker (and future wife) Virginia Johnson. In a laboratory on the campus of Washington University in St. Louis, the couple observed hundreds of men and women having orgasms, some with a partner and others through masturbation.

Masters and Johnson shared a mission—to help every adult achieve maximum sexual pleasure. In 1966, the huge sales of their first book, Human Sexual Response, seemed to further that goal. Readers who managed to slog through the couple’s often obscure prose (and millions of others who read or heard their findings distilled in the media) learned one critical fact: the clitoris, not the vagina, was the site of female orgasm. Masters and Johnson also discovered that women could have multiple orgasms in rapid order; thus, the female of the species was sexually superior to the male. The couple also recommended various methods, based on their research, for curing impotence and premature ejaculation. Despite or perhaps because of their assumption that good sex was merely a matter of correct technique, Masters and Johnson seemed to many Americans like liberators. One newspaper headlined a glowing review of their work, “A Short Course in How to Be Happy.”

Homosexuals probably benefited most from the new tolerance toward sexual matters. Until the 1960s, with few exceptions, their intimate lives had to be kept hidden. Exposure stripped uncounted numbers of men and women of their children, jobs, military careers, and reputations. Every authority—from churches to the federal government to the American Psychiatric Association—agreed that homosexuality was a form of “perversion” whose victims had to be cured, lest their depravity spread to others. Metropolises harbored a homosex-
ual underground of bars, restaurants, and pornographic movie theaters. But such institutions were always fair game for police raids. In the early 1950s, police in the District of Columbia arrested over a thousand adults a year for homosexual activity, and comparable totals were registered in other big cities. Guilt and self-hatred drove many homosexuals to alcoholism and some to suicide.

In the ‘50s, the Kinsey Report and the ribald candor of the Beats cracked open the wall of fear and loathing. In the ‘60s, the youth culture’s embrace of open and promiscuous sexuality dismantled it. By the end of the decade, a growing number of homosexuals were proudly calling themselves “gay” and celebrating behavior they had once felt forced to conceal. Some gay activists even advised “straights” to learn from their example. The essayist Paul Goodman wrote in 1969:

> queer life ... can be profoundly democratizing, throwing together every class and group more than heterosexuality does. ... I myself have cruised rich, poor, middle class, and petit bourgeois; black, white, yellow and brown; scholars, jocks and dropouts, farmers, seamen, railroad men, heavy industry, light manufacturing, communications, business and finance, civilians, soldiers and sailors, and once or twice cops. There is a kind of political meaning, I guess, in the fact that there are so many types of attractive human beings.

Nearly all the ardent champions of the new sexuality, whether straight or gay, were male. Young women could applaud the “discovery” of clitoral orgasms and the loosening of restrictions on where they could live and with whom. But it was men who produced the words and pictures that challenged obscenity statutes. And only men equated personal liberation with the desire, even the right to have sex with a diversity of partners, regardless of emotional commitment. This conviction united Hugh Hefner, a mansion-dwelling millionaire, with the working-class revolutionary John Sinclair, flamboyant leader of a popular Detroit rock band, the MC-5, and of the White Panther Party, a radical youth group briefly active in the Midwest. “We have found,” asserted Sinclair, “that there are three essential human activities of the greatest importance to all persons, and that people are ... healthy in proportion to their involvement in these activities: rock and roll, dope, and fucking in the streets. ... We suggest the three in combination, all the time.”

For biological and cultural reasons, few women had ever embraced such a raging vision. The male libido, when unrestrained by custom or law, often led to rape, unwanted pregnancy, and/or abandonment. In 1968 the White Panthers slipped into their manifesto the line, “Fuck your woman so hard ... she can’t stand up.” Some men reading that cringed, but, for women, it confirmed the link between sex and subordination that all the glee about “liberation” had neglected. This became a major theme of the thousands of consciousness-raising groups that sprang up by the end of the decade—free spaces where women spoke honestly about the pain that inequality and a lack of both respect and self-respect had caused.
Budding feminists angrily rejected the countercultural image of the braless madonna, content merely to bake bread and have sex with her "old man." The male hippie became a figure to condemn. "Here they come," mocked writer Leni Wildflower at the end of the '60s, "Those strutting roosters, those pathetic male chauvinists. . . . Here come the freaks in those tight bell-bottoms, tie-dyed T-shirts which their 'old lady' . . . made for them. . . . Male liberators, you are stepping on my neck." 17 The flowering of a new "sisterhood" fused intimacy with a wariness toward men, nudged some heterosexual women into experimenting with lesbian relationships, and encouraged life-long lesbians to speak their minds. Could any man, trained as he was to dominate the other gender, really make a woman happy? In the erotic realm, at a time when pornographic theater marquees were pitching "THE INCREDIBLE SEX REVOLUTION," feminists may have been asking the most radical question of all. 18

Were any revelations to be found in drugs? Since the '60s, it has been risky to offer even the most qualified assent. Parents and teachers, government officials and journalists condemn the chemicals most identified with the bygone youth culture—marijuana, LSD, peyote, and psilocybin—as nothing but instruments of self-destruction, for both individuals and society. Slogans like "Just say no" substitute for reasoned debate about the motivations of drug users and the effect of the chemicals on mind and body. Members of new generations consume the substances anyway, although few expect more than a short-lived thrill. It is difficult to capture a time when many young people, and not a few of their elders, believed the ingestion of certain substances was the pivot of a cultural renaissance. "Drugs were the fundamental text," remembered critic Geoffrey O'Brien, "If you had not read the book, you couldn't participate in the discussion that followed." 19 Or as rock icon Jimi Hendrix sang, "Scuse me, while I kiss the sky."

The most common drug in the '60s was marijuana, nearly as ubiquitous in youth communities as was bottled beer everywhere else in America. The potency of the "grass" smoked or swallowed varied widely—from the hallucinogenic to the mildly intoxicating. As with many consumer products, so did the price. Marijuana had been illegal since 1937 (simple possession was a felony in many states), but that did little to slow the commerce. It may even have increased it, as young people bonded against what seemed an irrational, vindictive prohibition. Few restrictions were placed on sales of alcohol and tobacco products, despite the obvious risks to public health. So why were America's rulers and many conservative citizens so frightened by the dreamy, often erotic qualities of marijuana? The answers only heightened the cultural conflict that Allen Ginsberg and his friends had declared in the mid-'50s.

But it was LSD, the acronym for lysergic acid diethylamide #25, that occasioned the greatest claims and the greatest censure. Ginsberg journeyed to Auschwitz in 1967 and, standing before the entrance to the camp where Nazis had slaughtered millions of Jews and other victims, glibly recommended "that
everybody who hears my voice, directly or indirectly, try the chemical LSD at least once, every man and woman and child in good health over the age of 14.” Fellow poet Gary Snyder commented, more prosaically, “Acid just happened to turn up as the product of this particular society, to correct its own excesses.”

Such statements appalled Theodore Roszak, a professor in the San Francisco Bay area, who popularized the term “the counter-culture.” “The gadget-happy American has always been a figure of fun,” wrote Roszak in 1969, “because of his facile assumption that there exists a technological solution to every human problem. It only took the great psychedelic crusade to perfect the absurdity by proclaiming that personal salvation and the social revolution can be packed in a capsule.”

Ironically, the object of so much promise and dread was discovered by accident. One April day in 1943, Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann was at work near Geneva at the sprawling complex of Sandoz Laboratories. Hofmann decided to synthesize a fresh batch of a compound made from rye fungi that he had created five years earlier and put away. In the process of mixing the chemicals, Hofmann spilled a small amount on his fingertips. Quite soon, his diary notes, the scientist was overcome by “a remarkable but not unpleasant state of intoxication, characterized by an intense stimulation of the imagination and an altered state of awareness of the world.” He closed his eyes and “there surged before me a succession of fantastic, rapidly changing image[s] of a striking reality and depth, alternating with a vivid, kaleidoscopic play of colors.” This continued for almost three hours. Albert Hofmann had taken the world’s first acid trip.

After World War II, Sandoz quietly began marketing LSD to psychiatrists and other scientific researchers in Europe and North America. But, in the United States, two different sorts of clients latched onto the amazing compound. One, predictably, was the bohemian artist who sought to test and broaden the imagination. Early trippers included jazz musicians Thelonious Monk and Dizzy Gillespie, as well as British novelist Aldous Huxley, then a resident of southern California. But an equally keen customer was the Central Intelligence Agency.

Hofmann’s invention seemed, at first, to be a spymaster’s dream come true. Under its influence, an enemy agent might divulge secrets lodged deep in his or her unconscious. LSD had neither odor, color, nor taste. Small quantities sprayed into a room or diluted in a water supply could, it was hoped, defeat one’s foes humanely. Disoriented and frightened, they would simply surrender.

During the 1950s, the agency spent millions of dollars to test the miracle drug. One group, working out of CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, did some self-experimentation. A staff member would dose his morning coffee with LSD and then become subject for a day. One man wept after tripping and refused “to go back to a place where I wouldn’t be able to hold on
to this kind of beauty." Another ran across a bridge over the Potomac River and went temporarily mad before his colleagues rescued him. Every automobile, he swore, looked like a bloodthirsty monster.

The CIA and the Army's Chemical Corps also tested LSD on hundreds of unwitting subjects, despite a provision of the 1947 Nuremberg Code, established in the wake of the Holocaust, that forbade such experiments. Some of the victims were government scientists, others were prisoners, mental patients,
and clients of prostitutes—all coerced into doing their bit for national security. A handful of suicides resulted, and a larger number of severe psychoses. And the CIA gained nothing. By the end of the ’50s, those in charge abandoned research on the “magic” drug. Under its influence, subjects had failed to give accurate information and often failed to concentrate on the interrogation process itself.

In the meantime, word of the drug’s existence had reached the Ivy League. At Harvard’s Department of Psychology, junior professors Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert began in 1960 to give psilocybin mushrooms to selected students and other curious guests—including Allen Ginsberg. Within two years, the pair had graduated, enthusiastically, to LSD. They dutifully published scientific papers on their research in respected academic journals. But fellow professors criticized them for indulging freely in the drugs under study, and parents complained when, according to Leary, “bright youths phoned home to announce that they’d found God and discovered the secret of the universe.”

In 1963 Leary left Harvard and became a relentless promoter of LSD consciousness. After Congress outlawed the drug in 1966, a series of arrests only added to his fame. Alpert began a personal voyage that resulted in his conversion to Hinduism and a change of name to Baba Ram Dass.

As with marijuana, the ban on LSD only enhanced its luster. By the late ’60s, one could buy the drug in most college towns and big cities. The greatest supplies and lowest prices could be found on both coasts. In Berkeley, a young chemist known as Owsley (short for Augustus Owsville Stanley III) got rich producing some 12 million high-quality doses from his own underground laboratory and distributing them throughout northern California.

A certain lore grew up around the potent liquid. Which form of it was purest and strongest—on a square of blotter paper, on a slab of clear gelatin, or on a multicolored tablet? The drug’s allure was enhanced by learning that many of the world’s most prominent rock musicians were using and writing songs about it—the Beatles, Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, the Grateful Dead, and Jefferson Airplane. LSD never achieved the popularity—or cultural acceptance—of marijuana, which was ubiquitous in mass gatherings of the college-aged young by the late 1960s. But “tripping” had become an indispensable rite of initiation; one emerged from the experience with matchless stories to tell.

One set of these tales brimmed with oracular glory, while another set warned against the equation of self-knowledge with getting high. It was safest to take LSD with a band of friends, at least one of whom had tripped before. Such an environment could help create an experience of intense pleasure and emotional catharsis. A group of trippers might begin by talking quietly and listening to music; then one person would notice an object in the room, on the grass, or just focus on a stray remark and mention it to the others—and the whole gathering would break into wild laughter.
Many spoke of feeling saner and more aware of their thoughts while “on acid” than during normal life. The chemical laid bare one’s obsessions and focused the mind on what seemed the greater spiritual unity present in the natural world—a common theme of mystics in a variety of cultures. As Aldous Huxley wrote about a trip on mescaline, whose effects mirrored those of LSD: “what Adam had seen on the morning of creation—the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence . . . flowers shining within their own inner light and all but quivering under the pressure of the significance with which they were charged.”26 In mundane terms, LSD made it possible to have a decent conversation with a tree.

But if LSD opened a portal to the extraordinary, it also screened out the rational. Trippers mistook the obvious for great insight; acid wisdom often reduced itself to disjointed rambling about the wonders of a drink of water or the setting sun. The day after he first took LSD, the writer Arthur Koestler told Timothy Leary, “This is wonderful no doubt. But it is fake . . . I solved the secret of the universe last night, but this morning I forgot what it was.”27

The belief that acid was a magic potion that would change one’s life—or the arrangements of society—was a terrible delusion. Serious depression struck many a persistent tripper, and some turned to drugs like heroin to soothe a mind jarred and jazzed instead of opened. To parry “straight” critics, acid devotees routinely cited all the legal chemicals—caffeine, nicotine, tranquilizers, barbiturates—that Americans consumed in huge quantities. By what right, they asked, do you condemn our choice of drugs? But the question negated the claim that psychedelics were a force for liberation. In the ’60s, the Du Pont company began to advertise itself as providing “Better Living through Chemistry.” Hippie street merchants sold buttons and multicolored posters emblazoned with the same words.

The bond of drugs also produced some horrific consequences. Thousands of young people moved to San Francisco’s Haight–Ashbury neighborhood (“the Haight”) in the mid-’60s seeking, as had the Beats a decade earlier, both sensual thrills and spiritual enlightenment. Such brilliant local bands as the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane catered to the new bohemians. Soon the lush green hills of Golden Gate Park, adjacent to the Haight, were packed with barefooted adolescents and young adults getting high on marijuana and LSD. Many of these people had little or no money and no plans to get a job. So they lived off the generosity of relatives, local businesses and, for several months, a group of anarchists called the Diggers who distributed free food and used clothing.

The Haight was an instant village with no moral center, where drugged-out vapidity passed for self-knowledge. Writer Joan Didion spent several weeks there in the spring of 1967 and dispatched numbing reports from the new cultural front: young people shifting to hard drugs like heroin and amphetamine after a spate of “bad” acid trips, adopting new lovers and new organic diets
with the same mercurial bemusement. Didion met one 5-year old girl who remarked, quite matter-of-factly, that she was “in High Kindergarten”; her mother routinely dosed her with LSD and peyote. What she had witnessed, remarked Didion, was “the desperate attempt of a handful of pathetically unequipped children to create a community in a social vacuum.” The Haight was clearly a village without a future.

In contrast, rock and roll was definitely here to stay. The music rapidly conquered the tastes and swayed the emotions of people whom other aspects of the youth culture had only grazed. LSD and sexual liberty were repellant to most churchgoing whites and blacks in the South. But they generally adored both Chuck Berry and Elvis Presley; soul singers like Aretha Franklin and Otis Redding also claimed fervent fans on both sides of the color line. By the mid-70s, Americans were spending more on rock tapes and records than on movies and sports events—four-fifths of all recordings were rock. All over the globe, young people who could buy or borrow a guitar were trying to emulate the musical avatars whose sounds filled the air and their imaginations.

The diffusion of rock and roll was one of the wonders of the postwar world. Emerging in the early ’50s from the urban black music called rhythm and blues, rock quickly revealed its protean nature, altering every species of popular music—folk, country and western, jazz, romantic pop, Mexican ballads, even Christian hymns. Cheap, portable devices—the transistor radio and the 45 rpm recording—as well as high-quality car radios helped weld rock fans to their music in a way no earlier style had matched. The pioneers of rock seldom paused to reflect upon the cultural sea change they had initiated; they were content to reap the rewards of fame, monetary and otherwise. Still, as critic Greil Marcus wrote in the 1970s, “they delivered a new version of America with their music, and more people than anyone can count are still trying to figure out how to live in it.”

The newness began with a critical truth: the roots of rock and roll were mainly black. The term itself derives from services held in rural Holiness churches in the Deep South during the ’20s and ’30s. There, congregations of African-American laborers and domestics “rocked and reeled” to fast, bluesy rhythms played on guitars, horns, and drums. Since the days of slavery, the black church had been developing a style of singing—the call-and-response pattern and percussive accents that artists like Ray Charles and James Brown adapted to secular lyrics in the 1950s. At the same time, the creators of rock freely borrowed whatever they needed—melodies, chord progressions, lyrics—from other musical traditions; particularly significant were the ballads and twangy guitar sounds of Scotch-Irish Protestants whose ancestors had settled in the foothills and mountains of the South. But rock and roll always remained a hybrid grafted from a robust black stock.

Ironically, that helps to explain why rock had such enormous appeal to young Americans who knew nothing of gospel music and didn’t suffer from
Jim Crow. Like the Beats, many whites in high school and college viewed black popular culture as a vibrant, emotionally honest alternative to a dominant culture they experienced as safe, boring, and hypocritical. In his 1957 essay “The White Negro,” Norman Mailer had made clear that “in this wedding of the white and the black it was the Negro who brought the cultural dowry.”

Mailer’s own examples were jazz and marijuana, but rock music provided more salient and infinitely more profitable ones. Elvis Presley modeled himself on such black bluesmen as Arthur Crudup, and one of his first hits was a cover of Crudup’s “That’s All Right.” In 1956 Elvis said of his music, “The colored folks been singing it and playing it... for more years than I know. ... I used to hear old Arthur Crudup bang his box the way I do now, and I said if I ever got to the place where I could feel all old Arthur felt, I’d be a music man like nobody ever saw.” Across the Atlantic, white British groups like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones started out playing blues for youths like themselves who longed for the raw authenticity symbolized by such black artists as Muddy Waters and Howlin’ Wolf.

The emerging demigods and demigoddesses of rock and roll were hardly the first young whites to adopt African-American styles. In the nineteenth century, minstrel shows featuring white actors pretending to be black were the nation’s most popular form of entertainment. In the 1920s, white performers stirred by the rich Creole musical traditions of New Orleans, created jazz bands that, along with the black combos of Duke Ellington and Count Basie, dominated the airwaves and record charts through the 1940s.

Rock, however, carried a generational charge whose power transcended the sphere of racial borrowing. Spurred by wartime migrations and the virtual end of child labor, teenagers from diverse class backgrounds began flooding into high schools that once had been the nearly exclusive province of affluent whites. Old barriers between musical styles fell quickly too, as young bands scavenged through a cornucopia of ethnic traditions.

Social mingling spawned a taste for rebellion. During the mid-’50s, George “Hound Dog” Lorenz, a white disk jockey broadcasting from Buffalo, gained a huge following among young people of all races. Lorenz sported a goatee and purple trousers, used the “jive” lingo then associated with black musicians, and was a hero to working-class kids who chafed at the self-disciplined lives their parents had led. Meanwhile, in East Los Angeles, Mexican-American teenagers like Ritchie Valens were writing and playing rhythm and blues songs with bilingual lyrics.

But rock was not a political insurgency. Cultural leftists like John Sinclair and Abbie Hoffman, a former civil rights organizer, certainly tried to harness the music to their ideological purposes. The White Panthers were an outgrowth of Sinclair’s rock band, and Hoffman hailed the birth of a quasi-revolutionary “Woodstock Nation” after the music festival held in a pasture