

The Liberal Coalition Unravels

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

As the Great Society reached its apex and the United States committed more men and material to the Vietnam War, a generation of White Americans came of age. Raised in prosperity and a culture of Cold War conformity, many of these “baby boomers” were able to attend college. Once there, they responded to the Civil Rights Movement, the War on Poverty, and Vietnam in a variety of ways, all of which challenged President Johnson’s liberal agenda and coalition.

1. The New Left

By 1960, about one third of Americans lived in the suburbs. During the 1960s, the average U.S. family income rose 33%. A material culture blossomed during the decade; by 1969, approximately 80% of Americans owned at least one car. Consumers spent billions of dollars each year on entertainment; by 1969, almost 80% of them owned a black-and-white television.

Raised in this environment of affluence, millions of **baby boomers** streamed into the nation’s universities. Once there, they organized to support a variety of causes.



TERM TO KNOW

Baby Boomers

Large generation of Americans born between 1946 and 1964.

During the 1960s, many students (most of them White) arrived on campuses hoping to “find themselves.” Instead, they found traditional systems that confined them to rigid programs of study and rules that limited what they could do during their free time. Amid growing activism for civil rights and other social movements, many students found the control and conformity in effect at many colleges unacceptable and mobilized to change them. Students who held more radical views aligned themselves with the **New Left**.



TERM TO KNOW

New Left

Activists of the 1960s and 1970s who rejected Democratic Party liberalism, advocated for radical reforms in civil and women’s rights, and opposed the Vietnam War.

One of the most prominent New Left groups was the **Students for a Democratic Society** (SDS). Organized in 1960 at the University of Michigan, the SDS expressed its philosophy in the “Port Huron Statement,” which was written by Tom Hayden and adopted by the SDS in 1962.



TERM TO KNOW

Students for a Democratic Society

A radical student movement associated with the New Left.

The opening paragraphs of the document identified concerns that many White, middle-class baby boomers shared in the early 1960s:

Port Huron Statement

“We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit.

When we were kids the United States was the wealthiest and strongest country in the world

As we grew, however, our comfort was penetrated by events too troubling to dismiss. First, the permeating and victimizing fact of human degradation, symbolized by the Southern struggle against racial bigotry, compelled most of us from silence to activism. Second, the enclosing fact of the Cold War, symbolized by the presence of the Bomb, brought awareness that we ourselves, and our friends, and millions of abstract ‘others’ we knew more directly because of our common peril, might die at any time. We might deliberately ignore, or avoid, or fail to feel all other human problems, but not these two, for these were too immediate and crushing in their impact, too challenging in the demand that we as individuals take the responsibility for encounter and resolution.”



THINK ABOUT IT

Which troubling aspects of American society compelled members of the SDS to take action?

The Port Huron Statement declared that the SDS was determined to fight racial discrimination and economic inequality through civil disobedience. It also called for increased activism and participation in the democratic process by ordinary citizens, especially young people:

“As a social system we seek the establishment of a democracy of individual participation, governed by two central aims: that the individual share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life; that society be organized to encourage independence in men and provide the media for their common participation.”

To implement their vision of a more participatory democracy, the SDS and other New Left groups focused their activism on three areas:

- College and universities
- Economic inequality
- The Vietnam war

1a. Colleges and Universities

The SDS and other student activists demanded that institutions of higher education allow more student participation in university governance. This became clear during the **Free Speech Movement** of 1964, which began at the University of California, Berkeley.



TERM TO KNOW

Free Speech Movement

Student protest movement in response to policies that prohibited political activism on college campuses. In 1964, the University of California, Berkeley—like many colleges and universities throughout the country—restricted students' ability to advocate on behalf of political causes on campus. In October of that year, a student who was handing out literature for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) on the Berkeley campus refused to show university police officers his student ID card. The officers arrested him. The campus police car was immediately surrounded by angry students, who refused to let the vehicle move for 32 hours until the student was released. In December, Mario Savio and other activists organized a sit-in on the Berkeley campus.



DID YOU KNOW

It was during this sit-in that Savio famously told a gathering of students, “There’s a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can’t take part! You can’t even passively take part! And you’ve got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you’ve got to make it stop!”

In early 1965, university officials abandoned policies that restricted political speech. The success of the Free Speech Movement in Berkeley inspired student activism throughout the country during the 1960s and 1970s.

1b. Economic Inequality

The New Left sought to mobilize poor people throughout the country, especially poor people of color, in an attempt to end poverty.

➞ **EXAMPLE** During the summer of 1964, a small group of White SDS members moved into a poor, predominantly Black neighborhood in Chicago and started the JOIN (Jobs or Income Now) program to combat racism and poverty. JOIN mobilized residents to resist urban renewal programs that threatened to displace them from their neighborhoods. It also called for the creation of police review boards to end police brutality against people of color and provided free breakfast and social and recreational activities to the neighborhood youth.

1c. The Vietnam War

Following the **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution** in 1964, the SDS and other New Left groups mobilized against the war in Vietnam.



TERM TO KNOW

Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

Gave President Johnson the authority to use military force in Vietnam without asking Congress for a declaration of war.

Members of the New Left criticized Johnson’s decision to escalate the war because it was made without any public debate. In their view, a small political elite should not have the power to make foreign policy decisions that affected the majority of Americans. This was not the participatory democracy that the New Left had in mind. The New Left also rejected the U.S. containment policy and objected to violence committed against the Vietnamese people. For all of these reasons, an **antiwar movement** began during the spring of 1965, not long after the first American troops arrived in Vietnam.



TERM TO KNOW

Antiwar Movement

A general term referring to groups and individuals mobilized in opposition to the Vietnam War.

In April 1965, the SDS organized an antiwar march and rally in Washington, DC. Approximately 20,000 people participated. In the same month, the faculty at the University of Michigan suspended classes for a day and conducted a 24-hour “teach-in” on the war. On May 15, 1965, the first national “teach-in” on the war took place on 122 campuses across the nation. Many of the teach-ins served as a setting for large antiwar rallies, like the one pictured below.



Students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison protest the war in Vietnam in 1965.

Source: “Yarnalga,” Flickr

2. The Counterculture

While the New Left challenged conventional liberalism by advocating for racial equality, economic security, and participatory democracy, the **counterculture** of the 1960s and 1970s rejected conventional middle-class life entirely through personal liberation and indulgence.



TERM TO KNOW

Counterculture

A culture that developed in opposition to liberalism and traditional expectations.

Young Americans associated with the counterculture, known as “hippies,” rejected the conventions of American society in a variety of ways.

➤ EXAMPLE Men sported beards and grew their hair long. Both men and women often wore clothing from non-Western cultures. The counterculture refused to observe traditional etiquette and behavioral norms.

➤ EXAMPLE Casual sex between unmarried partners was another expression of the counterculture’s rejection of traditional norms. Drug use, especially of marijuana and psychedelic drugs like LSD and peyote, was common.



A photograph of American youth taken near the famous Woodstock music festival in August 1969.

Some hippies dropped out of mainstream society altogether and joined communes. They shared a desire to live closer to nature, to respect the earth, and to reject modern life, including the pursuit of wealth and material goods.



DID YOU KNOW

Some communes grew their own organic food. Others abolished the concept of private property; members shared everything. Some refused to observe traditions regarding love and marriage and openly

practiced free love.

Music, especially rock and folk music, occupied an important place in the counterculture.



DID YOU KNOW

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, bands including the Doors, the Rolling Stones, and the Grateful Dead gained a large following.



A photograph of The Beatles in 1967 during the filming of *The Magical Mystery Tour*.

Rock concerts provided young people with an opportunity to form impromptu communities that celebrated youth, rebellion, and individuality.

➔ **EXAMPLE** In mid-August of 1969, almost 400,000 people attended a music festival in rural Bethel, New York, that became known as Woodstock. A total of 32 acts were performed during the 3-day

event. Many audience members consumed marijuana, LSD, and alcohol freely.



Mark Goff, a freelance reporter who covered Woodstock for *Kaleidoscope* (an alternative newspaper), took this photograph of Swami Satchidananda, who, during the opening ceremony, declared that music was “the celestial sound that controls the whole universe.”

Another freelance reporter, Glenn Weiser, remembered Woodstock as follows:

Reporter Glenn Weiser on Woodstock

“Early on Friday afternoon [August 15, 1969], about a dozen of us got together and spread out some blankets on the grass at a spot about a third of the way up the hill on stage right and then dropped LSD. I took Orange Sunshine, a strong, clean dose in an orange tab that was perhaps the best street acid ever . . . We smoked some tasty black hashish to amuse ourselves while waiting for the acid to hit and sat back to groove along with Richie Havens.

In two hours we were all soaring, and everything was just fine. In fact, it couldn’t have been better—there I was with my beautiful hometown friends, higher than a church steeple and listening to wonderful music in the cool summer weather of the Catskills. After all, the dirty little secret of the late ’60s was that psychedelic drugs taken in a pleasant setting could be completely exhilarating.”



THINK ABOUT IT

1. How does Weiser’s account describe the relationships between music, drug use, and the counterculture?
2. In what ways were the New Left and the counterculture similar? In what ways were they different?

3. The Unraveling of American Liberalism

One of the consequences of the social movements that emerged during the 1960s, including the New Left and the counterculture, was an increased questioning of the legitimacy of the Democratic Party and of the Great Society's ability to solve the nation's problems.

The unraveling of the liberal coalition that elected **Lyndon B. Johnson** as president in 1964 is ironic, because the Great Society achieved progress that previous reform movements, particularly Progressivism and the New Deal, were unable to accomplish.

➔ **EXAMPLE** By 1968, the percentage of Americans living below the poverty line had been cut nearly in half. Although more people of color continued to live in poverty compared to Whites, the percentage of poor African Americans had decreased dramatically.

➔ **EXAMPLE** The creation of Medicare and the expansion of Social Security benefits improved the lives of many elderly Americans.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Increased federal funding for higher education enabled more people to attend college than ever before.



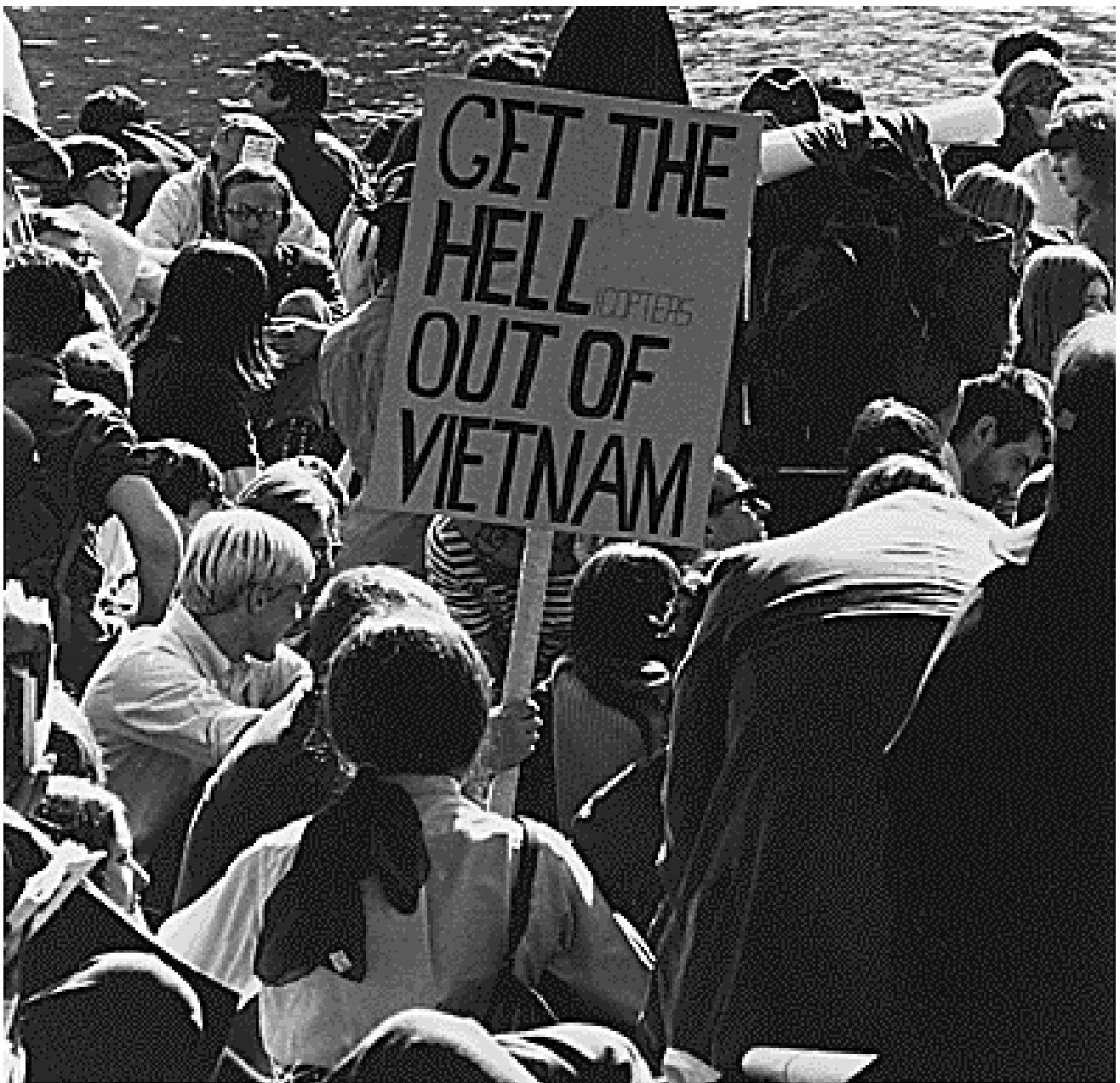
PEOPLE TO KNOW

Lyndon B. Johnson

Democratic U.S. president from 1963 to 1969, whose grandiose domestic agenda for civil rights and economic equality, known as the Great Society, ran up against a growing conflict in Vietnam and an unraveling of the liberal New Deal coalition that supported the Democratic Party.

One of the reasons support for Johnson's reform efforts lessened was his continued commitment to the Vietnam War. He was unwilling to withdraw forces from Vietnam, fearing that many Americans would then consider the effort a failure and that the U.S.S.R. and other communist nations would question America's ability to enforce its containment policy.





A protest against the Vietnam War in Washington, DC, in October 1967. The protest sign reads “GET THE HELICOPTERS OUT OF VIETNAM.”

By the late 1960s, as American casualties rose and more young men were drafted, people who had initially supported the Great Society and the liberal Democratic coalition began to question the president’s policies. Radical opposition to the war brought a number of other issues related to race, class, and gender to the forefront—issues that the Great Society had not resolved.

Instead of uniting Americans around a set of common, progressive goals, the Great Society and continued involvement in Vietnam divided the nation.



SUMMARY

The New Left and the counterculture emerged as a result of increasing frustration with President Johnson and the liberal Democratic coalition. However, they responded to this frustration in different

ways. Groups like the SDS asserted their rights on college campuses, mobilized to advance economic and racial equality, and protested against the Vietnam War. By doing so, they hoped to create a more participatory democracy. In contrast, hippies who were disenchanted with American society distanced themselves from it. They formed a counterculture based on the rejection of traditional expectations and pursued personal liberation. Despite differences in motivation and method, both movements contributed to the unraveling of American liberalism, a process that continued through the late 1960s.

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REFERENCES

Mario Savio quote, Free Speech Movement, 1964, CC: bit.ly/2oYmAco



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TERMS TO KNOW

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