

The Significance of 1968: The Presidential Election

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Like 1919, 1968 proved to be a tumultuous year. The liberal Democratic coalition that had supported President Johnson's Great Society was divided by the Vietnam War. Domestic inequality persisted. American cities were beset by racial conflict. At the same time, the Republican candidate for president, Richard Nixon, built a conservative coalition of those who saw political and racial unrest as evidence that America's moral foundation was crumbling.

This tutorial examines 1968, the most significant year in American history, in four parts:

1. The Tet Offensive

Although an **antiwar movement** quickly mobilized after Congress passed the **Gulf of Tonkin Resolution** in late 1964, most Americans supported President Johnson's escalation of the war in Vietnam.



TERMS TO KNOW

Antiwar Movement

The movement against the Vietnam War.

Gulf of Tonkin Resolution

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

Support for the war began to ebb as the draft expanded and more American troops were deployed in Southeast Asia. Although the United States identified itself as a friend of the South Vietnamese, U.S. soldiers found themselves in a strange environment thousands of miles from home, where many people resented their presence and aided the National Liberation Front (NLF), also known as the Viet Cong.

The NLF, with assistance from the North Vietnamese army, often used guerrilla tactics rather than conventional military methods. Surprise attacks, booby traps, and similar practices led to a growing number of American casualties.

➞ **EXAMPLE** By April 1966, more Americans were being killed in battle than South Vietnamese soldiers.

Frustrated by the losses, General William Westmoreland, the commander of American troops in Vietnam, called for the United States to take more responsibility for fighting the war. President **Lyndon B. Johnson** also urged Americans to “stay the course,” even as opposition to the war grew. In November 1967, Westmoreland claimed that the end of the war was in sight.



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.



General William Westmoreland (left) and President Lyndon Johnson (right) meet in the Oval Office in November 1967.

Westmoreland’s assurances were called into question when, in January of 1968, the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong launched the **Tet Offensive**, their most aggressive assault on South Vietnam.

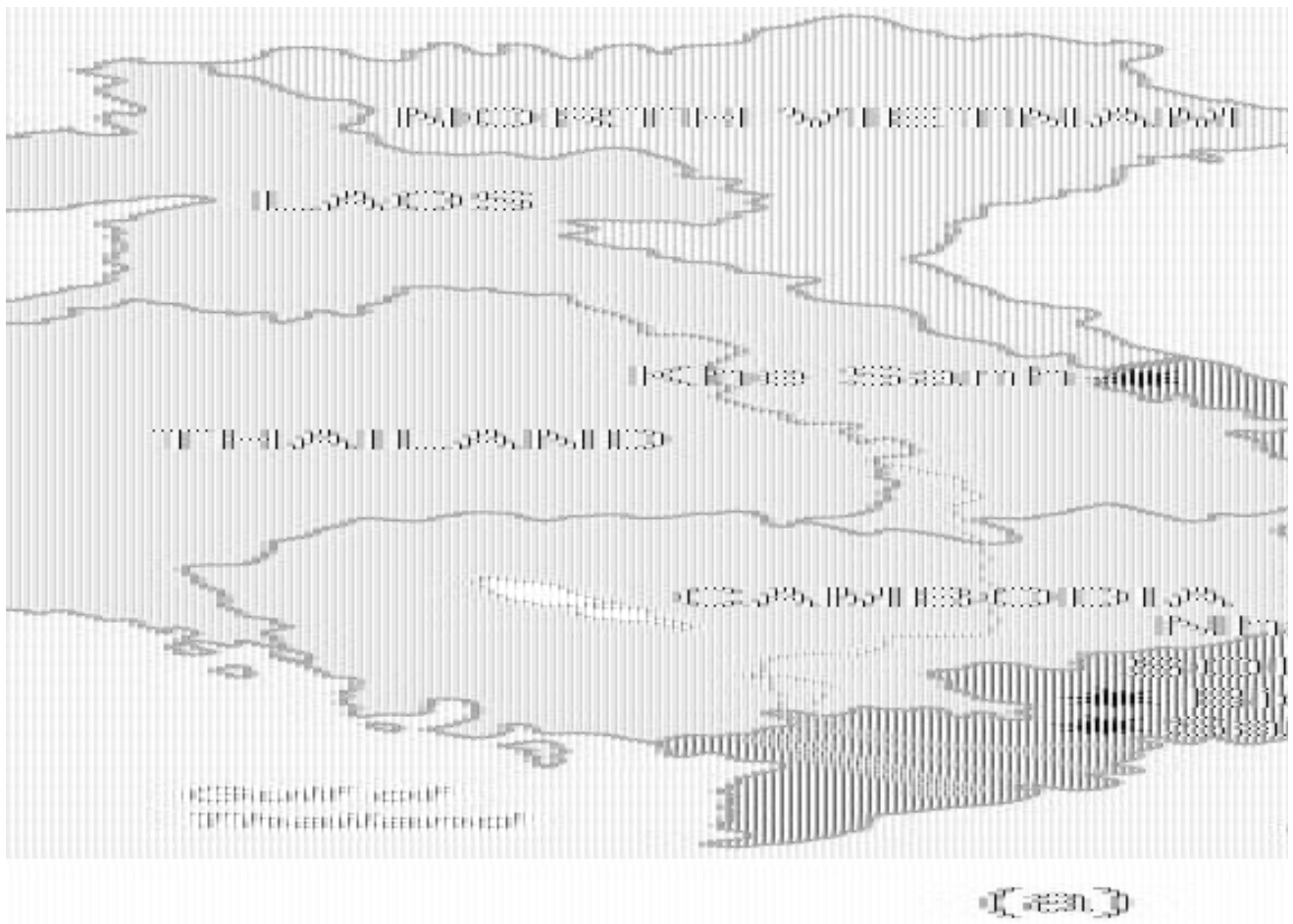


TERM TO KNOW

Tet Offensive

A series of surprise attacks by the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong on South Vietnam in January 1968.

During the offensive, North Vietnamese forces and Viet Cong guerrillas attacked nearly 100 cities in South Vietnam, including the capital, Saigon.



During the Tet Offensive, the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong attacked South Vietnamese and U.S. targets throughout Vietnam (a), with Saigon as the focus (b).

Source for (a): Modification of work by Central Intelligence Agency.

Despite heavy fighting, American and South Vietnamese forces responded quickly and recaptured all the locations that had been taken by communist forces. The communists suffered far more casualties than the United States, but television coverage of the offensive shocked U.S. viewers. The potential impact of the offensive was discussed on nightly news programs for weeks.

The Tet Offensive was the first event that led Americans to question whether the war would end soon. It also raised doubts about whether the Johnson administration was telling the truth about the state of affairs in Vietnam. Fueled by graphic images and on-the-scene news coverage, public opinion began to turn against the war in Southeast Asia.



American soldiers in Hue in 1968 during the Tet Offensive. The frustrating experience of fighting a seemingly unwinnable war left many soldiers and the general public disillusioned with the government.

2. Racial and Economic Inequality

During the spring and summer of 1968, two assassinations and continuing racial unrest combined with the Vietnam War to throw the Democratic Party's domestic agenda into disarray.

Shortly after the Tet Offensive, **Eugene McCarthy**, a Democratic Senator from Minnesota, announced that he would challenge Lyndon Johnson in the Democratic primary by running an antiwar campaign.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Eugene McCarthy

Democratic senator from Minnesota who campaigned for the presidency in 1968 on an anti-Vietnam War platform.

Political observers assumed that, as the incumbent, Lyndon Johnson would have the support of most Democratic voters. However, thanks to a campaign run largely by student volunteers, McCarthy won the New Hampshire primary on March 12, 1968. His success in New Hampshire encouraged **Robert Kennedy**, the brother of President Kennedy and the former U.S. attorney general, to also announce his intention to run for the Democratic nomination for president. Lyndon Johnson, suffering health problems and realizing that the war had damaged his public support, announced in late March that he would not seek reelection. His decision left the race for the Democratic nomination wide open.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Robert Kennedy

Brother of John F. Kennedy, who was assassinated in 1968 while competing for the Democratic Party presidential nomination.

As the Democratic Party fell into disarray, Martin Luther King Jr. helped organize a Poor People's March, which brought thousands of demonstrators to Washington, DC. Their objective was to convince the administration to focus on the **War on Poverty** instead of the war in Vietnam.



TERM TO KNOW

War on Poverty

Lyndon Johnson's plan to end poverty in the United States by extending federal benefits, job training programs, and funding for community development.



Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota.



Many participants in the Poor People's March occupied the National Mall in Washington, DC, for several weeks during the spring of 1968. In the photograph above, protestors march along Connecticut Avenue in June 1968.

The Poor People's March reflected an important change in King's civil rights strategy. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, he did not emphasize poverty and the other economic challenges faced by African Americans. Instead, he focused on integration and voting rights. The Poor People's March, however, illustrated his growing recognition that racial equality must be accompanied by economic equality.

As a result of this realization, King went to Memphis, Tennessee, in April 1968 to support a strike by the city's sanitation workers, many of whom were Black. There, he found that the local Civil Rights Movement was divided. Older activists, like King, supported nonviolence and sought integration. They were increasingly challenged by a new generation of activists motivated by the **Black Power** ideology.



TERM TO KNOW

Black Power

A political, social, and cultural ideology that encouraged African Americans to create their own institutions and develop their own economic resources independent of Whites.

On April 4, King was shot and killed by a White assassin while standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel.



In 1991, the National Civil Rights Museum opened on the site of the former Lorraine Motel in Memphis. The wreath in the photograph above indicates where King was shot on April 4, 1968.

Within hours of the assassination, cities across the nation exploded in violence as African Americans, shocked by King's murder, burned and looted urban neighborhoods. The riots reinforced the findings of the Kerner Commission (named for Illinois Governor Otto Kerner, who chaired President Johnson's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders). Johnson formed the commission in July of 1967, following violent race riots in

Detroit, Michigan, and Newark, New Jersey.

The Kerner Commission published its report in February 1968, 2 months before King's assassination. Its conclusions were stark and reinforced the perception that racial and economic inequality were intertwined.

The Kerner Commission

"This is our basic conclusion: Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal . . .

To pursue our present course will involve the continuing polarization of the American community and, ultimately, the destruction of basic democratic values.

The alternative is not blind repression or capitulation to lawlessness. It is the realization of common opportunities for all within a single society.

This alternative will require a commitment to national action—compassionate, massive, and sustained, backed by the resources of the most powerful and richest nation on this earth. From every American it will require new attitudes, new understanding, and, above all, new will.

The vital needs of the nation must be met; hard choices must be made, and, if necessary, new taxes enacted . . .

Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans.

What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain, and white society condones it."



THINK ABOUT IT

1. According to the Kerner Commission's conclusions, what are the consequences of racial and economic inequality?
2. According to the Commission, what have White Americans done to promote racial and economic inequality?
3. How do you think many African Americans reacted to the commission's conclusions? How do you think White Americans reacted?

3. Democrats in Disarray

The Democratic primary elections of 1968—and the presidential election that followed them—occurred during this period of racial unrest and growing frustration with the Vietnam War.

The Democratic Party was divided into several factions:

- Hubert Humphrey, Johnson's vice president, was supported by most party leaders. He appealed to unionized, blue-collar voters and European immigrants. Humphrey did not promise any significant changes to Johnson's domestic agenda or foreign policy.
- Idealistic young activists and college students supported Senator Eugene McCarthy and his antiwar campaign.
- Other Democratic voters, including Catholics, African Americans, and other minorities, and some members of the antiwar movement joined in support of Robert Kennedy.

White Southern Democrats continued to resist their party's support for the Civil Rights Movement. They backed a third-party candidate for president: segregationist **George C. Wallace** of Alabama.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

George C. Wallace

Governor of Alabama, who ran for president in 1968 on a platform of defending segregation and Southern states' rights.

During the California primary in June 1968, the Democratic campaign for president was struck by violence. Shortly after giving a speech to celebrate his close victory over Eugene McCarthy, Robert Kennedy was shot by a Jordanian immigrant, Sirhan B. Sirhan. Kennedy died 26 hours later.

By the time the Democratic Party convened for its convention in Chicago, in August 1968, it was in complete disarray. Some factions insisted on their right to a hearing. Others, most notably members of the antiwar movement, attempted to disrupt the convention altogether.



Wallace made his opposition to the Civil Rights Movement clear in 1963 when, as Governor of Alabama, he declared, "Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!"



Antiwar demonstrators march in Chicago during the Democratic National Convention in August 1968.

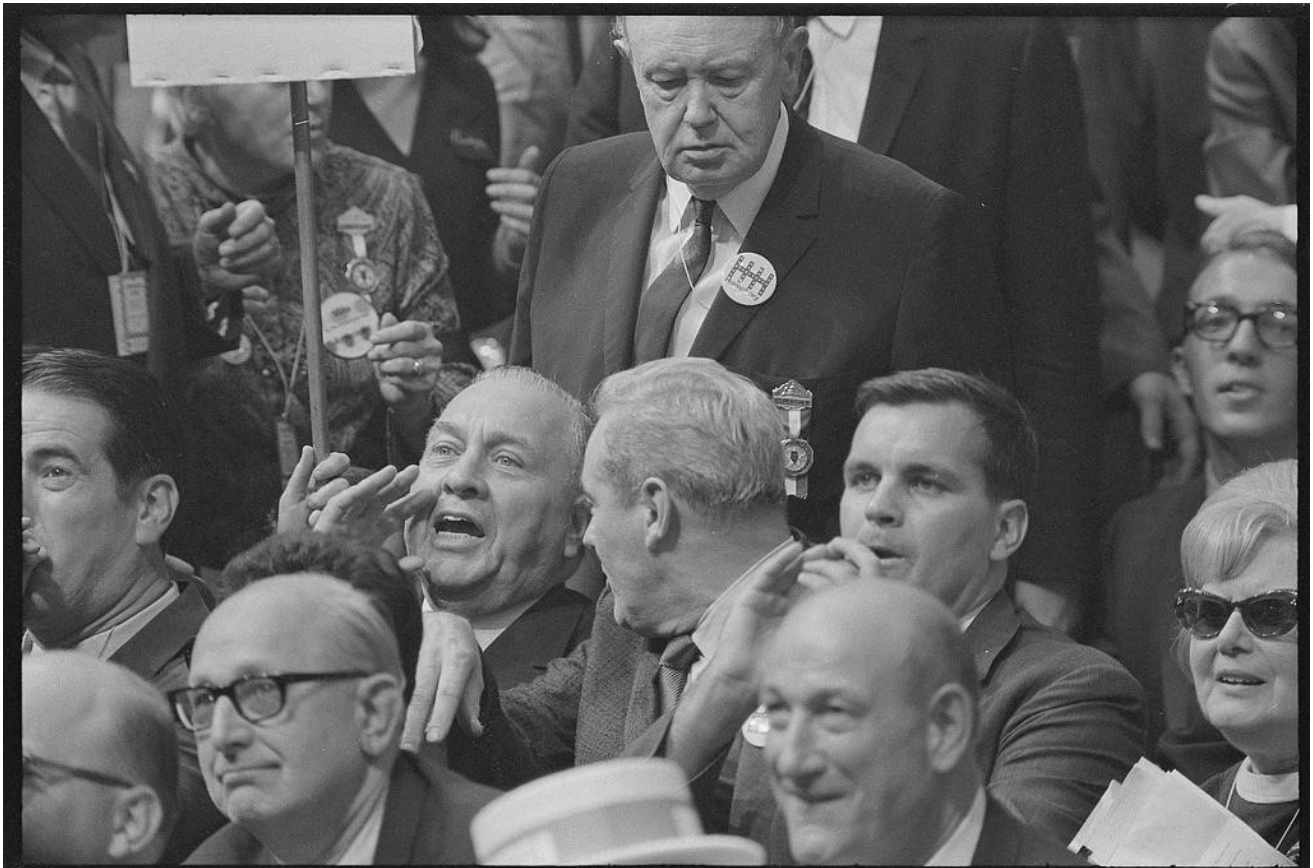


DID YOU KNOW

Some of the activists in Chicago during the convention called themselves “Yippies.” They were members of the Youth International Party organized by Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman. To demonstrate their contempt for the Democratic Party establishment, the Yippies nominated a pig named Pigasus for president.

To maintain law and order, Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley mobilized 12,000 city police officers, 6,000 Illinois National Guardsmen, and 6,000 U.S. Army soldiers. Television cameras captured what happened when this force encountered protesters—outside the convention hall and at other locations in the city. Armed officers advanced on crowds of protesters, clubbing some of them and setting off tear gas canisters. The protesters fought back, and the city descended into chaos.

The situation inside the convention hall was also chaotic. Senator Abraham Ribicoff of Connecticut criticized Mayor Daley’s suppression of dissent when he addressed the delegates. The mayor, who was seated with the Illinois delegation, responded hostilely as Ribicoff spoke.



Mayor Daley and Illinois delegates react to Senator Ribicoff's speech.

Hubert Humphrey won the Democratic nomination for president, but events at the Chicago convention showed that his party was deeply divided.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Hubert Humphrey

Democratic vice president to Lyndon B. Johnson, who was nominated as the Democratic Party candidate in the presidential election of 1968.

4. The Election of 1968

The images of violence, which contributed to a growing public impression that things were spinning out of control, seriously diminished Humphrey's chances of victory in 1968. Many liberals and young antiwar activists, disappointed by his selection over Eugene McCarthy (and still upset by the death of Robert Kennedy), did not vote for Humphrey. Other Democrats, and American voters in general, were shocked by the violence they saw in Chicago and believed the party was courting dangerous radicals.

As the Democratic Party unraveled, the Republican candidate for president, **Richard Nixon**, successfully campaigned for the votes of working- and middle-class White Americans to win the 1968 election.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Richard Nixon

Cold warrior and conservative Republican politician who won the tumultuous presidential election of 1968 by appealing to a “silent majority” of Americans who looked unfavorably upon the social upheaval of the 1960s.



Richard Nixon at a campaign rally during the summer of 1968.

Nixon later referred to these voters as the **silent majority**, based on the belief that the Great Society's racial and economic reforms ignored the interests of White, working-class, and middle-class citizens.



TERM TO KNOW

Silent Majority

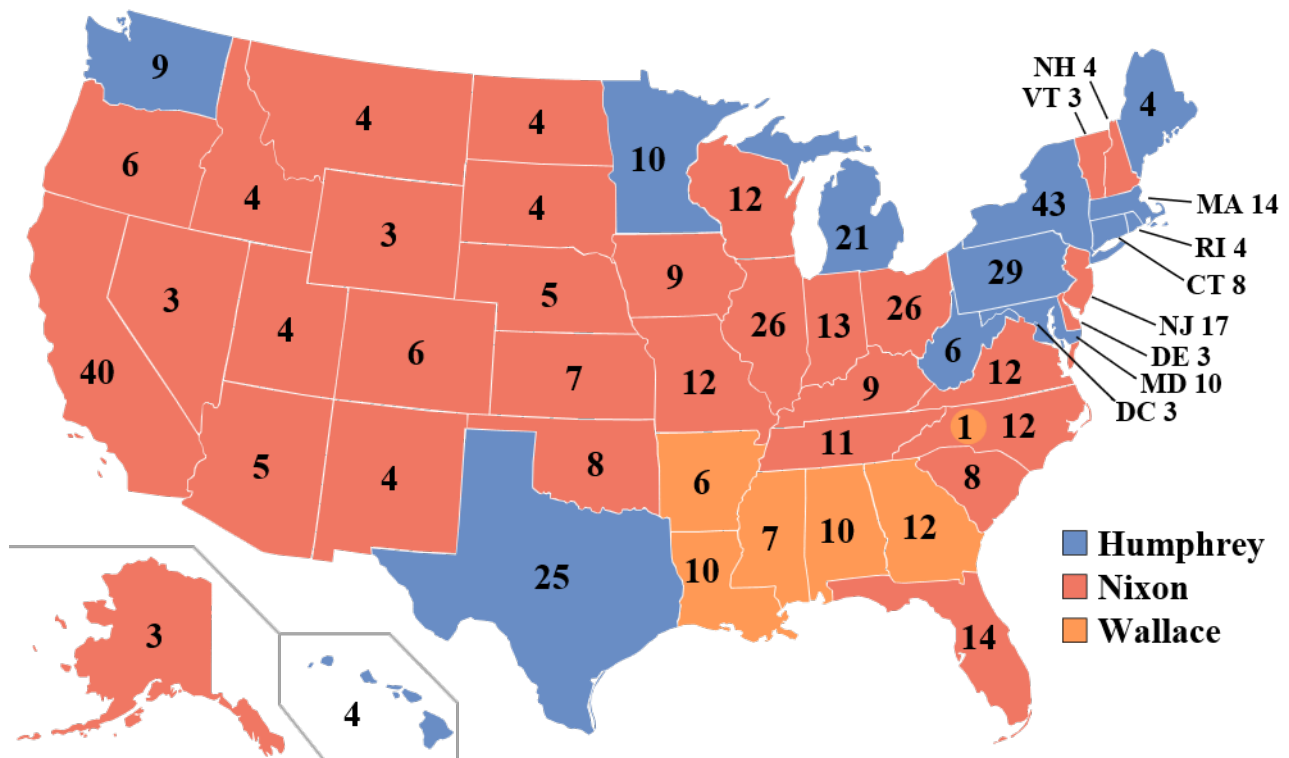
Richard Nixon's term for his political supporters whose voices he believed were being drowned out by those protesting for change during the 1960s.

According to Nixon, these voters comprised the majority of Americans who were upset by the social changes taking place in the country. Antiwar protests offended many Americans' sense of patriotism. Race riots seemed to indicate a collapse into chaos. Nixon's supporters also did not agree with the Kerner Commission's conclusion that White America was partly to blame for urban unrest and decay.

Nixon's promise to achieve stability, and his emphasis on law and order, appealed to the silent majority. Nixon pledged to take a strong stand against racial unrest and antiwar protests and harshly criticized the Great Society. He also claimed to have a plan that would end the war in Vietnam honorably and bring the troops home.

Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon received nearly the same number of popular votes during the 1968 election (approximately 31.3 million votes for Humphrey and 31.8 million for Nixon). However, Nixon won the

Electoral College, 301 to 191. Running on a pro-segregation, third-party ticket, George Wallace received close to 10 million votes. He was especially successful in the South, where he won five states.



The electoral map above indicates that the Democratic Party was in shambles and that the South, which had been a Democratic stronghold since the Civil War, was changing its affiliation. Wallace's success in the South, together with Nixon's electoral victory nationwide, marked the beginning of a period of conservatism in American politics.



SUMMARY

The year 1968 was one of the most eventful and transformative years in American history. The Tet Offensive led many Americans to question the containment policy and U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The findings of the Kerner Commission, the King assassination, and subsequent rioting across the nation indicated that the Great Society had not solved the nation's racial and economic problems. Political unrest in Chicago convinced many voters that the Democratic Party was incapable of dealing with these challenges. As the Great Society's liberal coalition unraveled, Richard Nixon's election initiated a resurgence of American conservatism.

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REFERENCES

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TERMS TO KNOW

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