



The Sixties in America: Social Strife and International Conflict

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Photo collage by D. Telles



Although best associated with its counter-culture (flower-power) and music, the 1960s was a tremendously turbulent decade both domestically and internationally for the United States. As historian Dr. Terry H. Anderson stated, “The long decade was an endless pageant of political and cultural protests.”¹ Other historians, Drs. George B. Tindall and David E. Shi said that “many social ills which had been festering for decades suddenly forced their way onto the national agenda.”² Any U.S. soldier—serving overseas or stateside—would have been affected by the critical issues defining this period. This was particularly true of the Civil Rights Movement and the Cold War. This article will give a brief snapshot of the decade and show the reader the chaotic nature of 1960s America in relation to both themes. This will help explain why it was so important for the U.S. to stem Communist insurrections in its own “back yard”—like those inspired by the Cubans. The “Sixties” as they became known, started off as a continuation of the socially conservative and materialistic 1950s—itsself an outgrowth of WWII—but quickly changed as many social and ethnic groups sought equality.

In the black community, the long-simmering Civil Rights Movement had gained momentum, even as it remained fragmented, multi-directional, and lacking a single leader. Although the forced integration of Little Rock Senior High School (Little Rock, Arkansas) in 1957 and sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960 had gotten national attention, the “Freedom Rides,” which began in May 1961, raised awareness more. They were sponsored by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and led by James L. Farmer.

The rides were designed to test whether the southern states would uphold federal laws to desegregate interstate travel facilities regardless of local mandates. Originally thirteen participants (seven black and six white) began the rides aboard commercial *Trailways* and *Greyhound* busses. They faced no significant opposition until reaching South Carolina. Then, hostility increased to outright violence—often while public law enforcement stood by and watched—as they traveled through the lower South.

Farmer described later events, “I was scared spitless and desperately wanted to avoid taking that ride to Jackson [Mississippi]. Alabama had chewed up the original thirteen interracial CORE Freedom Riders; they had been brutalized, hospitalized, and in one case disabled . . . blacks had been brutally pistol-whipped and clubbed with blackjacks and fists and then thrown, bloodied, into the back of the bus. Whites had been clobbered even worse for trying to intervene.”³ Television provided publicity and the momentum grew. Between June and September over 60 separate Freedom Rides took place as volunteers poured in despite the threats to life. The rides made the administration of President John F. Kennedy take notice as national attention was drawn to the Civil Rights Movement. At the same time, the violence embarrassed the United States internationally. However, the rides succeeded in forcing the desegregation of interstate travel facilities.⁴ Racial

events continued into 1962 to keep Civil Rights on the front pages of national newspapers.

James Meredith, an African-American student, attempted to enroll at the University of Mississippi, known as “Ole Miss,” but had repeatedly been



Organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the 1961 Freedom Rides were led by James L. Farmer (inset). Violence against the riders, evidenced by the burnt-out bus, raised public attention and garnered status for Farmer as one of the most influential leaders of the Civil Rights movement.

“The long decade was an endless pageant of political and cultural protests.”¹ — Dr. Terry H. Anderson



James H. Meredith, flanked by U.S. Marshals, was the first African-American student to attend the University of Mississippi. Supported by Mississippi's governor, Ross R. Barnett, the school's refusal to allow Meredith to attend forced President John F. Kennedy to send federal agents and troops to ensure his safety and to quell white mobs.

denied admission. The state government supported that position. After President Kennedy ordered U.S. Marshals and federal troops to Oxford, Mississippi, on 1 October 1962, Meredith was finally granted admission. Eventually 12,000 U.S. troops were required to keep and restore order at Ole Miss.⁵ But now Washington was acting on behalf of the movement.

President Lyndon B. Johnson's Memorial Day address on 30 May 1963 at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania [where President Abraham Lincoln had spoken a hundred years before] reinforced the federal government's position: "Until justice is blind to color, until education is unaware of race, until opportunity is unconcerned with the color of men's skins, emancipation will be a proclamation, not a fact."⁶ On 28 August 1963 on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C., Civil Rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech during the "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom." The speech—considered one of the most influential in American history, ended with the words, "Let freedom ring. And when this happens, and when we allow freedom ring - when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children - black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics - will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'"⁷ The speech electrified America, spurred the Movement forward, and helped to pave the way for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which outlawed segregation and discrimination in public places, schools, and places of employment. But King's fervent speech was short-circuited by an event that shocked America.

On 21 June 1964 three Civil Rights workers, Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goldman, and James Chaney were brutally beaten and killed by Ku Klux Klan members near Philadelphia, Mississippi. The murders rocked the nation

and drew national attention. Finally the brutality being imposed on those advocating equality became abhorred and repugnant. But internally the Civil Rights Movement began to splinter, and radical groups emerged—notably the "Black Power" element—to push away from non-violent activities. This further strained relations with whites within and outside the Movement.⁸



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" speech inspired millions. King was assassinated in 1968 for being an outspoken leader.



Andrew Goldman, James E. Chaney, and Michael H. Schwerner were CORE workers murdered by white-supremacists on 21 June 1964 near Philadelphia, Mississippi. Their gruesome deaths forced President Lyndon B. Johnson to send in Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents because local authorities were complicit in the murders.



As Dr. Martin Luther King watches, President Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1964 on 2 July. The act, whose passage was cemented by the murders of Schwerner, Goldman, and Chaney and King's speeches, outlawed racial segregation in schools, public, places, and employment.

One of the first and most visible reactions was the Watts Riots in Los Angeles, California, that stretched from 11 to 15 August 1966. To stem the escalating violence, the military had to be called in. When order was restored, 34 people were dead, 1,000 injured, 4,000 arrested, and over \$35 million of property destroyed.⁹ Watts and other riots to come destroyed the philosophy of non-violent revolution that Martin Luther King and other early Civil Rights leaders had advocated. As one historian reflected later, "The Watts Riot was the first major lesson for the American public on the tinderbox volatility of segregated inner-city neighborhoods. The riot provided a sobering preview of the violent urban uprising of the late 1960s and helped define several hardcore political camps: militant blacks applauded the spectacle of rage; moderates lamented the riots senselessness and self-destructiveness; and conservative whites viewed the uprising as a symptom of the aggressive pace of the civil rights legislation."¹⁰ One of those in the last category was future President Richard M. Nixon. He condemned the rioters in a 15 August 1966 U.S. News and World Report editorial, by declaring that the riots were a catalyst for a general decline in Americans'

respect for law and order, and that "the nation simply can no longer tolerate men who are above the law." He cited Abraham Lincoln who said, "There is no grievance that is a fit object of redress by mob law."¹¹ But, the violence only got worse.

Black Power was most notably influenced by Malcolm X. Considered its "father," he was a member of the

Nation of Islam, a Black Muslim group that promoted the superiority of their race. Although Malcolm X later left the organization and was murdered in 1965, the outspoken, powerful orator, had a lasting influence on black America. Stokely Carmichael, chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) wanted to remove whites from black-dominated Civil Rights organizations demanding equality now. His rationale was that blacks had to achieve equality themselves, without relying on help from whites. Not surprisingly, Carmichael advocated abandoning non-violence to achieve equality: "We must wage a psychological battle on the right for black people to define themselves as they see fit, and organize themselves as they see fit . . . We are on the move for our liberation . . . Move on over, or we're going to move over you."¹² Although the U.S. Army had been integrated by the mid-1950s, racial stigmas persisted. The riots and the growing Black Power radicalism were something that American soldiers could not ignore.

The distracted military also faced threats associated with the Cold War—the arms races and inherent state of tension between the two superpower competitors; the United States and the Soviet Union. Communism was posed as a grave threat to the American way of life. In 1964, the Republican Presidential candidate, Senator Barry Goldwater, said, "The fact is that Communism is the only great threat to the peace! The fact is that Communism is a threat to every free man."¹³ This attitude permeated conservative America and made anticommunism a bipartisan national policy. While the rise of Socialism and Communism became prevalent in Latin America, after Fidel Castro's successful revolution deposed Cuban

dictator General Fulgencio Batista in 1959, the Soviet Union was perceived as America's greatest threat.

The Cold War "heated up" on 1 May 1960 when the U-2 reconnaissance aircraft piloted by Francis Gary



Francis Gary Powers was shot down over the Soviet Union on 1 May 1960 while conducting a covert reconnaissance mission. The U.S. denied that it was conducting such flights and was deeply embarrassed when the Soviets presented Powers... alive.

Powers was shot down deep inside the Soviet Union while conducting a covert flight. Powers survived and became a news spectacle who debunked U.S. government denials that it had violated Soviet airspace. The Premier of the Soviet Union, Nikita S. Khrushchev canceled the US-Soviet Summit talks in Paris. This exacerbated the rivalry between the superpowers that continued throughout the decade.¹⁴ To further fuel the Cold War, the strained relations with Cuba were torn apart by an international incident.

Newly elected President John F. Kennedy inherited the Bay of Pigs invasion authorized by President Dwight D. Eisenhower. American-Cuban exiles (Brigade 2506) were to invade the island in the spring of 1961 and overthrow the revolutionary government of Fidel Castro. The invasion took place on 17 April at a site locally known as Bahía de Cochinos [Bay of Pigs]. Although the invasion force got ashore, air superiority had not been established and the anticipated popular uprisings against the regime did not occur. The Cuban Revolutionary Forces, personally directed by Castro, launched airstrikes and vigorously counter-attacked. By 21 April, the remnants of Brigade 2506 had been captured or killed. President Kennedy did not authorize U.S. military intervention to insure success. Some of the captured exiles, along with several hundred Cuban citizens, were executed for their roles in the invasion.



The anti-Castro 2506 Brigade was trained by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to invade Cuba. The 17 April 1961 invasion was a disaster, and the survivors were ransomed to the United States in December 1962.



In August 1961, President John F. Kennedy, shown here with Alberto Lleras Carmargo, President of Colombia, enacted the Alliance for Progress. It was designed to bolster economies and living standards in Latin America and to counter Cuban-inspired Communist movements.

On 21 December 1962, 1,113 survivors were repatriated to the United States for \$53 million dollars worth of food and medicine. The Kennedy Administration was severely

embarrassed by the “failure that reverberated around the world” as one Bay of Pigs veteran later described it.¹⁵

The Bay of Pigs insured that the Soviet Union would have a satellite state in the hemisphere. Fearing a falling “domino effect,” the United States, henceforth, did its best to prevent the further spread of Communism in the region. To offset the image caused by the Bay of Pigs, President Kennedy pushed the Alliance for Progress for Latin America. It was to be a 10-year effort to help the economies and improve living standards in the region. U.S. officials thought that this would reduce the conditions for insurgency that allowed the Cuban revolution to succeed.

Tensions in Europe were increased on 13 August 1961, when the Soviet-dominated East German government began to erect a wall to isolate Allied-controlled West Berlin. The number of defections to the West had become an embarrassment. The “Wall” became a symbol of Soviet oppression until it was torn down in 1989. East-West tensions continued to escalate until 1962, when they came to a head in the Western Hemisphere.

One of the most pivotal events in the Cold War, having huge repercussions worldwide, was the Cuban Missile Crisis. After the Bay of Pigs fiasco, the Soviets reinforced Cuba’s defenses. Bomber and fighter aircraft, anti-aircraft weapons, and troops were provided to repel another U.S. invasion.¹⁶ On 14 October 1962, a U-2 reconnaissance flight revealed the presence of nuclear missiles in Cuba. The Soviet Union had positioned medium range ballistic missiles on the island after denying that it had furnished offensive weapons to Cuba. These Soviet nuclear weapons threatened the southeastern United States, the Caribbean, Mexico, Central America, and the northern South American nations. President Kennedy could not ignore the Soviet’s blatant act of aggression.



On 13 August 1961, East Germany began to build the Berlin Wall to separate it from the West. It became a symbol of Communist oppression until torn down in late 1989.



By 1961, Cuba had openly moved into the Soviet sphere, as Fidel Castro and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev show. The U.S. was determined not to allow another Socialist government in the Western Hemisphere.

President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev defused the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was likely the closest that the world has come to nuclear war.



President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, TX, on 22 November 1963 by Lee Harvey Oswald. The death of the youthful and popular President shocked America.

Instead of conducting the air strikes and land invasion recommended by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, President Kennedy decided that a naval “quarantine” to block further missiles from getting to Cuba was the best response.¹⁷ He thought this plan would prevent the Soviets from countering with an invasion of West Berlin. The Organization of American States (OAS) supported the quarantine and several Latin American countries provided warships for the blockade. These nations were aware that any missile on Cuba could also be directed at them. Initially, the Soviet Union did not back down.

The United States alerted its forces for an invasion of Cuba to physically remove the missiles. It was assumed that if this happened, the Soviet Union, would conduct a retaliatory attack elsewhere which would cause a nuclear confrontation. U.S. reconnaissance flights continued until a U-2 was shot down over Cuba. That was most likely the closest that the world has ever come to a full-scale nuclear exchange. Fortunately, cooler heads of state prevailed.

Premier Khrushchev agreed to remove all missiles from Cuba. In return, the United States agreed that it would respect Cuba’s sovereignty and not allow another invasion force to be based on U.S. soil. Secretly, the U.S. pledged to the Soviets that it would remove its nuclear capable missiles from Turkey. Cuba was ousted from the OAS. But, solidarity was short-lived in the region.

While touring Dallas, Texas on 22 November 1963, President Kennedy was shot and killed by Lee Harvey Oswald. Aboard *Air Force One* just two hours later, Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn in as the 36th President. America was in shock. Its popular and youthful president had been assassinated. Most Americans still remember where they were the moment they heard the news of President Kennedy’s death. An uncomfortable uneasiness dominated the national psyche as the United

- **May 1** - A Soviet missile shoots down an American Lockheed U2 spy plane; the pilot Francis Gary Powers is captured. U.S.-Soviet Summit meeting cancelled.
- **November 8** - In a close race, John F. Kennedy defeats Richard M. Nixon to become the youngest (43) president.

1960



- **April 17** - The Bay of Pigs Invasion fails by April 19.
- **May 4** - 13 Black and white student Freedom Riders from the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) leave Washington DC on 2 buses, to test mandated integration laws in bus stations in the deep South.
- **August 13** - Construction of the Berlin Wall begins, restricting movement between East Berlin and West Berlin and forming a clear boundary between West Germany and East Germany, Western Europe and Eastern Europe.

1961



- **October 14** - Cuban Missile Crisis begins after a U-2 flight over Cuba reveals Soviet nuclear weapons being installed. A stand-off ensued to threatened the world with nuclear war.
- **October 22** - In a televised address, U.S. President John F. Kennedy tells the nation that Soviet missiles are in Cuba.
- **October 28** - The crisis ends when Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev announces that he has ordered the removal of Soviet missile bases in Cuba.

1962



- **August 28** - Martin Luther King, Jr. delivers "I Have A Dream" speech at the Lincoln Memorial to 250,000 during the "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom."
- **November 22** - President John F. Kennedy assassinated in Dallas, Texas, and Texas Governor John B. Connally is seriously wounded. Vice President Lyndon Baines Johnson becomes the 36th President.

1963



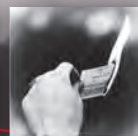
- **June 21** - Three civil rights workers, Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney, are murdered near Philadelphia, Mississippi, by white supremacists.
- **November 3** - U.S. presidential election, 1964: Incumbent U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson defeats Republican challenger Barry Goldwater garnering more than 60 percent of the popular vote.
- **December 3** - Berkeley Free Speech Movement: Police arrest over 800 students at the University of California, Berkeley, following their takeover and massive sit-in at the administration building to protest the Regents' decision to forbid Vietnam War protests on university property.

1964



- **March 7** - Bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama: Some 200 Alabama State Troopers clash with 525 civil rights demonstrators.
- **May 5** - The first draft card burnings take place at the University of California, Berkeley.

1965



- **August 1** - Sniper Charles Whitman kills 13 people and wounds 31 from atop the University of Texas tower, after earlier killing his wife and mother.

1966



- **July 15** - The Detroit race riots occur.

1967

1960 - 1967 United States

Timeline by L. Goddard.



On 10 August 1964, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, giving President Johnson the authority as Commander-in-Chief to use military force in Southeast Asia without a declaration of war. The number of U.S. servicemen in Vietnam was quickly increased.

States entered the mid-1960s.

Opposition to an escalating war in Vietnam added to the unease in America. In early August 1964, two U.S. Navy Destroyers, the USS *Turner Joy* and USS *Maddox*, were allegedly fired upon by North Vietnamese gunboats while patrolling international waters off Vietnam. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, passed by Congress just days later, authorized President Johnson as the Commander-in-Chief to escalate military force in Vietnam without a formal declaration of war.¹⁸ The number of U.S. troops sent to South Vietnam corresponded with increased ground combat until early 1968. By then, there were more than 400,000 American servicemen in country and numerous Allied contingents. The Vietnam War was brought home to America by nightly television news coverage.¹⁹ As the U.S. role in the war became more contentious, opposition grew as the numbers of servicemen involved escalated.

Military service for two years was the norm for men from 18 to 26 years of age. Registration for the draft was mandatory for males on their eighteenth birthday. This was not a popular war. Many American youth were against the war. In 1965, draft card burning demonstrations came into vogue as opposition to the war began to tear the country's fabric. By 1967, the anti-establishment counter-culture movement—followers who were often called “hippies”—was gaining momentum, rocking the country's conservative roots. In many respects, the United States government faced an internal low-level insurgency. The opposition included several domestic terrorist organizations. In the meantime, Cuban-sponsored Wars of National Liberation became the main threats in Latin America.

Washington was determined not to allow another “Cuba” in the Western Hemisphere. In April 1965, when a populist revolt followed the coup against leftist President Juan Bosch of the Dominican Republic, President Johnson reacted quickly. U.S. Marines and the 82nd Airborne Division—supported by OAS contingents from



One of the most popular forms of protest in the 1960s to the escalation of combat in Vietnam was to burn draft cards. Every male from the ages of 18 to 26 had to register for military service. Most male college students received deferments until their grades became substandard.

Brazil, Honduras, Paraguay, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica—invaded the capital of Santa Domingo to restore order. The intervention sent a signal to Latin America. The U.S. government would not tolerate another Communist country in the hemisphere. This is one of the reasons why Special Forces were sent to Bolivia in 1967: to insure that there would not be another “Cuba.”²⁰

The 1960s were a tumultuous period in American history. The pressures of Civil Rights and racial equality, combined with increasingly violent political radicalism, stretched the fabric of American society. Overseas, the Cold War and the struggle to contain the further spread of Communism dominated national policy. While America was becoming polarized at home, it had to present a strong front internationally. It was vitally important for the U.S. to become a bulwark against the spread of Communist-inspired insurgencies in Latin America. They were simply “too close to home” and posed a threat to a fragile and divided America. ♣

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Endnotes

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The 1964 Tonkin Gulf Resolution allowed President Johnson to increase the number of troops in Vietnam without a declaration of war. Opposition to the war increased in conjunction with the escalation.



U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic in April 1965 showed Latin America that Washington would permit no more "Cubans" in the Western Hemisphere.

