THE 1960S

At the beginning of the 1960s, many Americans believed they were standing at the dawn of a golden age. On January 20, 1961, the handsome and charismatic John F. Kennedy became president of the United States. His confidence that, as one historian put it, “the government possessed big answers to big problems” seemed to set the tone for the rest of the decade. However, that golden age never materialized. On the contrary, by the end of the 1960s it seemed that the nation was falling apart.

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THE GREAT SOCIETY
During his presidential campaign in 1960, John F. Kennedy had promised the most ambitious domestic agenda since the New Deal: the “New Frontier,” a package of laws and reforms that sought to eliminate injustice and inequality in the United States. But the New Frontier ran into problems right away: The Democrats' Congressional majority depended on a group of Southerners who loathed the plan’s interventionist liberalism and did all they could to block it.

DID YOU KNOW?
On June 27, 1969, police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York City's Greenwich Village. The bar's patrons, sick of being subjected to harassment and discrimination, fought back: For five days, rioters took to the streets in protest. “The word is out,” one protester said. “[We] have had it with oppression.”
Historians believe that this “Stonewall Rebellion” marked the beginning of the gay rights movement.

It was not until 1964, after Kennedy was shot, that President Lyndon B. Johnson could muster the political capital to enact his own expansive program of reforms. That year, Johnson declared that he would make the United States into a “Great Society” in which poverty and racial injustice had no place. He developed a set of programs that would give poor people “a hand up, not a handout.” These included Medicare and Medicaid, which helped elderly and low-income people pay for health care; Head Start, which prepared young children for school; and a Job Corps that trained unskilled workers for jobs in the deindustrializing economy. Meanwhile, Johnson’s Office of Economic Opportunity encouraged disadvantaged people to participate in the design and implementation of the government’s programs on their behalf, while his Model Cities program offered federal subsidies for urban redevelopment and community projects.

THE WAR IN VIETNAM
Unfortunately, the War on Poverty was expensive—too expensive, especially as the war in Vietnam became the government’s top priority. There was simply not enough money to pay for the War on Poverty and the war in Vietnam. Conflict in Southeast Asia had been going on since the 1950s, and President Johnson had inherited a substantial American commitment to anti-communist South Vietnam. Soon after he took office, he escalated that commitment into a full-scale war. In 1964, Congress authorized the president to take “all necessary measures” to protect American soldiers and their allies from the communist Viet Cong. Within days, the draft began.

The war dragged on, and it divided the nation. Some young people took to the streets in protest, while others fled to Canada to avoid the draft. Meanwhile, many of their parents and peers formed a “silent majority” in support of the war.

THE FIGHT FOR CIVIL RIGHTS
The struggle for civil rights had defined the ‘60s ever since four black students sat down at a whites-only lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, in February 1960 and refused to leave. Their movement spread: Hundreds of demonstrators went back to that lunch counter every day, and tens of thousands clogged segregated restaurants and shops across the
upper South. The protesters drew the nation's attention to the injustice, brutality and capriciousness that characterized Jim Crow.

In general, the federal government stayed out of the civil rights struggle until 1964, when President Johnson pushed a Civil Rights Act through Congress that prohibited discrimination in public places, gave the Justice Department permission to sue states that discriminated against women and minorities and promised equal opportunities in the workplace to all. The next year, the Voting Rights Act eliminated poll taxes, literacy requirements and other tools that southern whites had traditionally used to keep blacks from voting.

But these laws did not solve the problems facing African Americans: They did not eliminate racism or poverty and they did not improve the conditions in many black urban neighborhoods. Many black leaders began to rethink their goals, and some embraced a more militant ideology of separatism and self-defense.

THE RADICAL ’60S
Just as black power became the new focus of the civil rights movement in the mid-1960s, other groups were growing similarly impatient with incremental reforms. Student activists grew more radical. They took over college campuses, organized massive antiwar demonstrations and occupied parks and other public places. Some even made bombs and set campus buildings on fire. At the same time, young women who had read The Feminine Mystique, celebrated the passage of the 1963 Equal Pay Act and joined the moderate National Organization for Women were also increasingly annoyed with the slow progress of reform. They too became more militant.

The counterculture also seemed to grow more outlandish as the decade wore on. Some young people “dropped out” of political life altogether. These “hippies” grew their hair long and practiced “free love.” Some moved to communes, away from the turbulence that had come to define everyday life in the 1960s.

THE DEATH OF THE 1960S
The optimistic ’60s went sour in 1968. That year, the brutal North Vietnamese Tet Offensive convinced many people that the Vietnam War would be impossible to win. The Democratic Party split, and at the end of
March, Johnson went on television to announce that he was ending his reelection campaign. (Richard Nixon, chief spokesman for the silent majority, won the election that fall.) Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy, the two most visible leftists in American politics, were assassinated. Police used tear gas and billy clubs to break up protests at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Furious antiwar protestors took over Columbia University in New York as well as the Sorbonne in Paris and the Free University in Berlin. And the urban riots that had erupted across the country every summer since 1964 continued and intensified.

Shreds of the hopeful ‘60s remained. In the summer of 1969, for example, more than 400,000 young people trooped to the Woodstock music festival in upstate New York, a harmonious three days that seemed to represent the best of the peace-and-love generation. By the end of the decade, however, community and consensus lay in tatters. The era’s legacy remains mixed—it brought us empowerment and polarization, resentment and liberation—but it has certainly become a permanent part of our political and cultural lives.