

Chapter VI

LOVE ME, I'M A LIBERAL:

THE POLITICS OF THE 1960S AND VIETNAM

By 1960, the United States had become the world's greatest military and economic power, extending its influence abroad and enjoying steady progress at home, in large measure due to the ideology and political economy of *liberalism*. Though it had been a political and economic organizing principle throughout the twentieth century, liberalism became the crucial element in the establishment of world power after World War II. Though it can take many forms and have different meanings according to time and place, in general liberalism in the Cold War era involved a commitment to economic growth with government involvement, vast international trade and investment, anti-communism, and the containment of "radical" reform via the incorporation or cooptation of such movements into existing, "mainstream," political structures.

Liberalism's aim, as one of its leading advocates, the historian Arthur Schlesinger, put it, was to create a "vital center" to establish stability and peace while shutting out "extremism" from the left and right. Thus, in the years after World War II, the government intervened in the economy--particularly through military spending programs--to foster higher employment, wages, and profits. By expanding the economic pie, most Americans would get a bigger piece and there would be no need to redistribute wealth and create economic equality. Politically, fundamental differences between Democrats and Republicans lessened as all sides agreed on the overriding need for economic growth and to fight communism, at home and overseas, and accepted the general outlines of McCarthyism, if not its extremes or the repulsive nature of its founding father.

Just as a generation of American leaders after 1945 created a liberal world order based on transnational investment, private markets and containment, the Kennedy and Johnson administrations did the same in the 1960s. Organizing the country's business according to liberal Keynesian principles and offering policies to extend corporate power and profits, the economy grew at a consistent, strong pace. Politically, to protect that vital center, the government practiced containment against reformers and so-called radicals at home as it had against Communists in Eastern Europe, Asia, and elsewhere. An activist foreign policy, economic expansion, and moderate reform at home were interrelated and necessary parts of the U.S. liberal system. In the years following World War II, however, blacks, women, minority groups, cultural critics and others developed a striking critique of American society, calling for action to promote equality and opportunity for those left behind. While such changes were indeed needed to create consumers, maintain international credibility, prevent upheavals, and for other reasons, U.S. leaders wanted to make sure they were channeled into "safe" directions. Any reform would thus be conducted from the top down; legal obstacles to opportunity might be removed but grassroots empowerment would not be encouraged. African-Americans would thus have significantly more success in demanding the right to ride on buses, eat in restaurants, or vote than in agitating for jobs and decent housing. Women, many of whom had gained economic independence and personal fulfillment while working in factories during the war years, were encouraged to return home, have babies, and accept the patriarchal order. Young people were expected to get a college degree and a good job, and wear a grey-flannel suit to the office every day. When significant segments of these groups questioned such plans and clamored for civil rights, gender equality, or participation in the political process, the liberals balked.

In the JFK and LBJ years, then, this integrated system of “growth liberalism,” political anticommunism, and containment--foreign and domestic-- was well ingrained in American life and the government, it seemed, could effectively address problems of poverty, inequality, and discrimination to create a truly “Great Society.” By mid-decade, however, liberalism began to unravel--both because of its inherent structural limits and, more importantly, due to the growing commitment to Vietnam. In just a few years, the postwar order was in shambles and American politics was on a rightward journey that continues to this day.

The Affluent Society

Between 1960 and 1965, the U.S. gross national product grew by nearly one-third--and by 5 percent annually for the next five years--while corporate profits soared by 88 percent. Unemployment in the 1960s never rose above 4 percent, and median family income went up nearly 25 percent. Though union wages increased by a slower rate than labor leaders wanted--about 3 percent a year in the early 1960s--those raises still exceeded inflation, which ran at about 1 percent. Even after inflation began to quickly rise due to Vietnam, it topped out at 6 percent, still much lower than it would become in the 1970s. America’s global economic position was equally strong. The United States controlled over 25 percent of the world’s trade; family income was almost \$11,000, two to three times larger than most industrialized allies; and the world’s currencies were pegged at fixed rates to the American dollar. Economically, this was an era of *Pax Americana*.

This economic strength would be critical to the events of the 1960s, offering new opportunities to working-class Americans, facilitating the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement, and, in general, giving the false impression that American growth had virtually no

limits. In large measure, the U.S. government had fostered these conditions. First JFK, and then LBJ, were wholly supportive of the American corporate community. JFK essentially suspended antitrust actions in the Department of Justice, proposed an investment tax credit for businesses, and established new depreciation guidelines for corporate write offs. In 1962 alone, such measures saved American businesses \$2.5 billion in taxes, or 10 percent of their previous year's bill. Kennedy, an economic novice when he took office, was becoming a Keynesian--using government policy to jump start and maintain economic growth. In 1962, the president thus proposed a massive \$10 billion tax cut. Current tax rates, JFK contended, had become a drag on the economy, discouraging investment, reducing consumption, and preventing full employment. Even though the government would take in much less revenue, the president argued that the tax cut would "prevent the even greater budget deficit that a lagging economy would otherwise surely produce."¹

Kennedy's economic strategy would be an integral, if not the principal, part of 1960s liberalism. By using the government, via spending and reduced taxation, to foster economic expansion, Kennedy and his successor would enlarge the middle class, enable more young people to attend college, make jobs and, maybe most importantly, create hopes and aspirations in groups that had been left out of the postwar economic boom. 1960s Liberalism was thus a combination of economic growth and a movement for political reform by marginalized or disenfranchised groups. And for a time in the early 1960s, the government was able to make progress on both counts--expanding the economy and offering some hope to the underclass and minorities. Vietnam, however, dashed that progress, and liberalism's shortcomings were exposed in the process.

Building a “Great Society”?

In the early 1960s Michael Harrington, a socialist scholar, conducted research on poverty in America and found many disturbing conditions. Perhaps one-quarter of the country--40 million or so people--lacked adequate housing, food, and health care. Harrington's findings, published in 1962 as *The Other America*, shocked Americans, especially liberals such as John F. Kennedy, who had read Harrington's book. The depth of poverty and need within a wealthy and powerful nation represented a major failure of social policy that would have to be addressed in the coming years. Harrington's work alone, however, did not cause national reform. African-Americans, other ethnic groups, women, and working people were also agitating for change from below, calling for jobs, housing, safety standards, and health care. In the early 1960s, then, this awareness of poverty, and the call for action at the grassroots level, would lead to a national commitment to create a “Great Society.”

John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson held power at a unique moment in modern American history. Riding the crest of postwar growth and progress, they naturally assumed that with enough money and commitment America's social problems could be overcome. Kennedy thus proposed a minimum wage increase, more federal support for education, expanded Social Security benefits, and a federal commitment to provide housing to the poor. Congress, however, did not really share such a vision and so eliminated the most needy from minimum wage reform, refused to fund a public works program, and rejected aid for migrant workers and youth and for public transportation. At the time of Kennedy's assassination, then, his record was ambivalent at best.

Lyndon Johnson was driven to do more. Having grown up in rural Texas often feeling unloved and ridiculed, he graduated from a teachers' college, and worked with poor minority children. Because of this background he claimed an affinity for the less-privileged and he wanted to establish a domestic reform program to rival the "New Deal" of the 1930s. Declaring "an unconditional war on poverty" in his first State of the Union address in 1964, the new president would act quickly to follow up and improve on the Kennedy vision while securing his own place alongside his hero Franklin Roosevelt as the greatest reform presidents of the century. For a time, in 1964 and 1965, LBJ's efforts seemed to be working, as congress passed a series of measures dealing with health care, housing, education, safety, transportation, and poverty. To a large degree, such reform was made possible by another tax cut, in 1964, which invigorated the economy, boosted the gross national product, increased wages, and lowered unemployment. With a strong economy, reform was possible because Americans could support programs to help the poor without feeling like they were making undue sacrifices. At no time did LBJ ever contemplate redistributing wealth or creating material equality between social classes. Rather he hoped to create a Great Society--which would include civil rights progress as well [to be covered in the next chapter]--in which the poor and minorities would be uplifted, if not equal. To liberals, class harmony, not conflict, would be the norm.

The first major step in Johnson's antipoverty crusade came with the 1964 passage of the *Economic Opportunity Act*, which created the *Office of Economic Opportunity*, or *OEO*, headed by JFK's brother-in-law Sargent Shriver. As LBJ envisioned it, the act was not a welfare program but would help prepare the untrained, unskilled, and undereducated for careers of their own. Thus, the OEO would administer the Job Corps, a program in which poor youth could be

trained and educated for future employment; VISTA, a “domestic Peace Corps” program for volunteers to travel to underdeveloped areas and assist in training and teaching; and also provide legal aid, mental health services, small business development aid, safety programs, and rural loans. These programs, based on early examination, seemed to be paying dividends. Poor youth, it seemed, were gaining skills and jobs, poor children were better-prepared for school, and many underprivileged Americans were gaining self-esteem and dignity. Such results, LBJ hoped, would only increase with future programs.

For the rest of the Johnson presidency, congress continued to pass such reform programs, though at a decreasing pace and with diminishing results. In 1965, two major pieces of legislation--concerning education and health care--comprised the backbone of the Great Society. The president believed that the American education system was in a state of crisis. Due to the baby boom, school enrollments had grown by 43 percent in just a decade, so classrooms were overcrowded and underfunded. In America’s largest cities, about 60 percent of High School students were dropping out. Federal aid was imperative, as LBJ saw it; “the kids is where the money ain’t,” he colloquially described the situation. He thus had made federal support of education a major issue in his 1964 campaign and, upon reelection, began to press for congressional action. After negotiations with teachers’ unions and the Catholic church--which wanted aid to parochial schools included in the federal program--Johnson was able to secure passage of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*. As he saw it, the new law would provide the foundation for future progress. Upon signing the bill, the president related that “as a son of a tenant farmer, I know that education is the only valid passport from poverty.”²

Under the new education act, federal monies would be sent principally to those school

districts in which most family incomes were less than \$2000 a year. To appease the Catholics, LBJ made aid available to parochial school *students*, but not to the schools themselves. The president hailed the new program as a great success, claiming that millions of poor boys and girls now had access to language and reading training, audio-visual equipment, specialized education for preschoolers, nurses, counselors, bilingual teachers, and, for adults, special classes for High School dropouts. The law, as liberals saw it, was attending to America's education emergency.

On the other end of the life cycle, LBJ also recognized that the nation's elderly lacked adequate health care, and he attacked that problem with vigor as well. Old people had incomes only about half as large as younger Americans but had three times more hospital visits and did not have sufficient health insurance. The president thus proposed a national *Medicare* program in which the government, via contributions to the Social Security fund, would provide hospital insurance for Americans over the age of 65. The bill was immediately popular among the aged. "Please try to pass the Medicare for us old folks," one woman wrote to LBJ, "I just don't want to be a burden to anyone."³ The 89th congress, dominated by liberals, apparently liked the idea even more and ultimately created a program even more generous than LBJ had envisioned.

The administration designed its original bill to cover just hospital visits for the elderly, but Wilbur Mills, the chair of the House Ways and Means Committee and one of Washington's more powerful legislators, began to expand the program as he sensed the political attractiveness of the concept of providing health care for the elderly, and despite repeated charges by the powerful medical lobby that it would usher in "Socialized medicine." Soon, Medicare included a voluntary insurance program to cover doctors' and surgical fees, with the government and senior citizens splitting the premium payments. Mills then expanded the program more dramatically

yet, extending coverage to the poor, regardless of age, in the *Medicaid* program. Under Medicaid, participating states would receive matching federal funds to pay the bills of welfare recipients or the medically indigent--the blind, disabled, and so forth--who did not receive welfare but neither could afford to pay for health care.

Johnson proclaimed the new Medicare system a huge victory. “No longer will older Americans be denied the healing miracle of modern medicine,” he declared at the signing ceremony, “no longer will illness crush and destroy the savings they have so carefully put away.”⁴ And the government immediately began to put its money behind the new program, with costs rising from \$3.4 billion to \$18 billion in the first decade after passage. As a result, almost all aged Americans qualified for hospitalization benefits, and well over 90 percent also purchased supplementary doctor’s insurance. About 95 percent of doctors, most of whom originally opposed the bill, eventually participated in the Medicare system. Millions of men and women with health problems who previously could not afford medical care now could be treated. Likewise, the Medicaid program reached large segments of the population, with the number of beneficiaries soaring from 4 to 24 million in a decade and funding growing to \$14 billion. Additional measures covering medical research passed congress as well, leading to expanded funding in the fights against heart disease, cancer, strokes, and mental retardation. Death rates from tuberculosis and measles declined, more young people than ever were immunized from childhood diseases, and thousands of new doctors and nurses were trained with government assistance. In larger numbers than ever before, the elderly and poor now had access to basic medical attention and were enjoying a markedly better quality of life.

Though the educational and medical reforms of 1965 marked the peak of the Great

Society, other measures continued to pass congress in subsequent years. LBJ's expanded the food stamp program dramatically, increasing the number of Americans eligible for such assistance by over 2500 percent between 1965 and 1975. Aid to Families with Dependent Children [AFDC] grew significantly in the Johnson years as well, with the number of recipients eventually quintupling. To address America's urban problems, congress in 1965 created the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and a year later began to fund model city projects nationally. In the Motor Vehicle Safety Act, lawmakers for the first time established safety standards for the auto industry and also created a Department of Transportation to coordinate new programs. One of the most useful antipoverty programs was *Head Start*, begun in 1965 as part of the OEO to help preschool children from poor families by providing basic education skills as well and meals and medical examinations. In that summer alone, over 500,000 children--rural and urban, northern and southern--enrolled in pilot Head Start programs. To LBJ, it was such an impressive start that he expanded the project and gave it permanent status.

Lyndon Johnson and his supporters believed that the War on Poverty had gotten off to a generally successful start. Because of LBJ's political skills and a liberal consensus on helping the less fortunate, medical care was now available to millions who previously went without it because of age or poverty, and their health and life spans improved accordingly. Social Security benefits increased, thus raising the standard of living of the elderly. In 1959, about 40 percent of the aged lived below the poverty line, but by 1970 25 percent did, and by 1974, it was down to 16 percent. Likewise, the numbers of Americans living in poverty dropped significantly too, from 21 percent in 1959 to 12 percent in 1969. Though not there yet, LBJ and his supporters believed that America was on the path toward becoming a truly great society.

Liberalism and its Discontents: The Free Speech Movement

At the same time that two liberal presidents were trying to reform America's racial policies and attack poverty, there was a growing movement, especially among the young, to criticize and restructure the liberal state. Nationally, white youth had been supporting and emulating the efforts of black students and activists in the civil rights movement as they challenged southern segregation. Taking their cue from young African-Americans, they created a parallel political movement. Centered in various institutions--most notably the Free Speech Movement, Students for a Democratic Society, and antiwar groups--this movement would in a short time produce an effective and searing critique of American "corporate liberalism," one which would, by the end of the decade, help undermine the liberal consensus that had dominated the postwar era and, ironically, help lead to a right-wing backlash against liberalism that has grown stronger over the past generation. Collectively known as the *New Left*, this movement offered a new vision of American society. Unlike the "old left," it would not allow the ideology of anti-communism to dominate its discourse; unlike liberals, new leftists would not put their faith in the ability of the government and corporations to do the right thing. In this movement, young people would demand a role in making the decisions which governed their lives. Breaking down the barriers between private and public life, these young activists expected their government to act as a moral agent for change, just as individuals were supposed to act morally in their own private sphere. With such general ideas in common, and sharing a commitment to social justice, the New Left erupted into American life at the outset of a new decade.

In May 1960--as the odious House Un-American Activities Committee [HUAC] was conducting its witch hunts for so-called subversives in hearings in San Francisco--police attacked

and arrested several hundred students from the flagship Berkeley campus of the University of California, prompting thousands to return the following day to protest the repressive law enforcement tactics. Shortly thereafter, HUAC put out a film that it hoped would demonstrate that the demonstrations were the work of radicals and communists, but the move backfired. *Operation Abolition* was so paranoid, ham-handed, and ridiculous that it became a cult classic among college students and political dissenters--sort of a *Reefer Madness* for a new political generation--and ultimately motivated thousands to travel to the Bay area, making Berkeley, as radical leader Tom Hayden described it, “the mecca of student activism” in the 1960s.⁵

The president of the University of California system, Clark Kerr, a liberal democrat, became the lightning rod for student dissatisfaction. Kerr envisioned the U.C. system as a “multiversity” which would educate untold numbers of students and develop stronger ties to the corporate community and the “knowledge industry,” meaning more university Research and Development and contracting for big business and government, especially the Department of Defense and other agencies such as the CIA. As Kerr saw it, “the university and segments of industry are becoming more and more alike. As the university becomes tied into the world of work, the professor . . . takes on the characteristics of an entrepreneur.”⁶ To the Berkeley students, Kerr embodied many of the contradictions of 1960s liberalism, preventing Malcolm X from speaking on campus due to separation of church and state, for instance, but allowing Billy Graham to appear. Kerr, the angry Berkeley youth charged, represented the liberal paternalism that, on one hand, offered rhetorical support for equality and justice but nonetheless limited students’ rights under the concept of *in loco parentis* (“in place of one’s parents”), restricting dormitory visiting hours and curtailing their freedom of expression.

In 1963 and especially 1964, after Kerr, under political pressure, banned students from passing out leaflets and circulating petitions along Bancroft Strip, just outside the main gate of campus, the student upheaval began and ultimately gave rise to the *Free Speech Movement* [FSM]. In September 1964, various student groups--from the Socialist left to the Goldwater youth--protested Kerr's ban with rallies, pickets and vigils and some directly challenged the president's edict by setting up tables and passing out literature. In turn, campus police ordered eight students to appear before a Berkeley disciplinary board. Instead of eight, however, several hundred students marched on Sproul Hall, the administration building, whereupon Kerr suspended the eight originally cited. By 1 October, U.C. students were in near-rebellion, again setting up tables to defy the ban. Police arrested one of them, Jack Weinberg, a veteran civil rights activist, but before they could get him into their squad car, hundreds of other students converged on the scene and preventing the police from taking Weinberg away.

Students surrounded the police car for the next 32 hours, taking turns standing on its hood [after taking off their shoes] to deliver speeches of protest, despite being taunted and pelted with foreign objects by fraternity boys and athletes. Thus was born the FSM. At that point, the administration blinked, releasing Weinberg without charges and submitting the suspension of the other eight students to an academic senate committee. But Chancellor Edward Strong would not reinstate the eight while charges were pending, and Kerr chided the protestors' "ritual of hackneyed complaints" and redbaited the FSM, claiming that about 40 percent of its participants were "very experienced and professional people . . . tied in with organizations having Communist influences." Seymour Martin Lipset, a ranking liberal intellectual, chimed in that the FSM's civil disobedience tactics were "like the Ku Klux Klan."⁷ Liberals and young people had clearly come

into conflict in Berkeley, not for the last time in the decade.

In any event, the tensions on Campus continued to build. In mid-November, students again set up tables and passed out leaflets, and the administration began taking names of the young people staffing the tables. At the same time, the faculty senate decided to reinstate six of the original eight demonstrators, but not Art Goldberg and Mario Savio. The FSM immediately took action, holding a rally at which 3,000 students confronted the Board of Regents and listened to Joan Baez sing protest songs, whereupon the Regents *increased* Goldberg's and Savio's punishment. As a result, Berkeley graduate students went on strike and on 2 December about 5,000 students again rallied at Sproul Hall and listened to Savio deliver one of the more compelling speeches of the era. Directly challenging Kerr's view of the "multiversity" and the impersonal liberal-corporation alliance, Savio, a working-class mathematics student, told the crowd that

there is a time when the operations of the machine become 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. And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you're free, the machines will be prevented from running at all.⁸

Savio's attack on the U.C. system and domestic containment was one of the earliest and most trenchant critiques of liberalism to emerge in the 1960s. Liberals, to FSM activists and so many others, were patronizing, impersonal, and repressive. The liberal state and liberal institutions spoke of lofty ideals like freedom and liberty, but in the final analysis the government

and educational system became autonomous and impersonal, like a machine, rather than responsive to people's needs or rights. It was, to Savio and others, anti-democratic. And the Berkeley administration continued to provide the protesting students with evidence to support such arguments. After Savio's speech, over a thousand students poured into Sproul Hall, sat down, and refused to move. The Berkeley forces of order responded immediately. After several hours of occupation, at 2:00 A.M., over 600 state and local law enforcement officials ringed the building and moved inside to oust the demonstrators, twisting arms and legs and banging heads as they dragged them away, and arresting over 750 for trespassing in what had become the largest mass arrest in state history.

FSM leaders and supportive faculty fought back, calling a university-wide strike, coordinating the various protest actions, distributing handbills, and posting bail for students, while about three-fourths of Berkeley's 1,200 professors canceled classes in a show of solidarity with Savio and the others. Feeling the heat and hoping to alleviate the crisis, Clark Kerr called a campus-wide meeting to discuss the situation with the Berkeley community. The U.C. president, with the support of many department chairs, told over 15,000 people in the crowd that the demonstrations were "unwarranted" and he urged students to return to classes. FSM members not surprisingly jeered Kerr and other speakers and, when the meeting adjourned, Savio approached the stage to speak, but campus guards grabbed him and dragged him away. In perhaps the most overt display of liberal paternalism, the Free Speech Movement's leader was denied the right to speak freely. But the university's repressive measures backfired as the angry crowd left Kerr with no choice but to allow Savio to return to the podium to make an announcement. The next day, the faculty established new rules for student speech, basically

echoing the FSM positions. The Board of Regents subsequently replaced Chancellor Strong with Martin Meyerson, who had been sympathetic to the students' agenda, and gave them access to Bancroft Strip to pass out literature, recruit members, and otherwise disseminate information. The FSM--comprised mostly of young people, 19 to 21 years old, had won, and throughout the country college students took note of the power of collective action on behalf of democratic rights.

“Democracy Is In the Streets”

In June 1962, 59 people traveled to a small town in Michigan to discuss establishing “a new kind of politics.” Mostly young college students--but also union activists and Socialists--attended, and the product of their work, *The Port Huron Statement*, came to define the oppositional politics of the decade and was a major step in the emergence of the most important dissident democratic organization of the 1960s, the *Students for a Democratic Society* [SDS]. Though never organizationally strong, and not really intended to be since they were wary of centralized, bureaucratic groups, SDS would have a major role in mobilizing the antiwar movement in 1965 and its members would offer a compelling critique of liberalism that would be widely accepted and adapted by 1968.

“We are people of this generation,” the Port Huron participants observed, “bred it at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, [but] looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit.”⁹ Hoping to shed the complacency of the 1950s and energize American politics, these young activists called for a new commitment to social justice, civil and human rights, and--in the core concept of their conceptual framework--*participatory democracy*. American democracy, as they saw it, was practiced from the top down, dominated by political and economic elites, and it

offered people, in most cases at least, voting privileges and free expression, but actually discouraged popular participation in the system. In a “participatory” democracy, people would actually have a significant role, a voice, in making the decisions that affected their lives whether they be poor, young, or otherwise outside the mainstream of American life.

SDS came to life in Ann Arbor, at the University of Michigan, in early 1960. There, student activists like Al Haber, Sharon Jeffrey, Rob Ross, Tom Hayden and others began raising awareness on campus of the southern civil rights movement, holding conferences on U.S. democracy and human rights, and fanning out to other colleges to recruit members. That summer, Hayden, along with radical students from Berkeley, picketed the Democratic convention in Los Angeles with Martin Luther King and a year later he went south to become the SDS representative to civil rights organizations there. In Mississippi, police beat him up, and while in Georgia local authorities jailed him. Hayden, a journalist, exploited his tribulations, sending out reports of his experiences which created publicity and lured new members for SDS. By mid-1962, he was emerging as the best known young radical of the era, and his authorship of the Port Huron Statement added to his influence. Hayden’s “new politics” challenged both the government-corporate establishment and the “old left.” Elites had grabbed control of society’s institutions and left the people apathetic and isolated. Groups that should be progressive, like labor unions, had become mainly bureaucratic entities, taking on lives of their own rather than helping the working class or the poor, and buying into the stifling politics of anti-communism. Thus Hayden called for a movement of students to “wrest control of the educational process from the administrative bureaucracy” and for the people from all walks of life to create a system of “participatory democracy.”

Though the Port Huron Statement had attracted a good deal of attention, SDS was still small and mostly marginal. In 1963, however, it began to take a new direction, releasing another manifesto, *America and the New Era*, attacking liberalism and thereafter beginning its first major grassroots organizing project. In their pamphlet, SDS theorists scored the Kennedy, corporate liberals who conducted national affairs to ensure mainly that the “old order of private corporate enterprise shall be preserved and rationalized.” SDS did, however, still see some “good liberals” in the political arena, but they were “trapped by the limitations of the Democratic Party, but afraid of irrelevancy outside.”¹⁰ SDS’s job, then, would be to awaken those liberals and offer them refuge within its new politics. The first attempt to do this came with the establishment of the *Economic Research and Action Project* [ERAP]. Funded with a grant from the United Auto Workers union, the program was designed to send SDS members into poor communities where they would live among and organize the residents there. This marked a shift in SDS priorities, as more activist members like Hayden and Rennie Davis--who replaced Al Haber as the head of ERAP--began to press for an “interracial movement of the poor” at the grassroots level as the key to social change rather than reform at the university level among middle-class, mostly white students. To Hayden, the “liberal posture” of campus activism led to inaction and irresponsibility. In the universities, “liberalism is defused, lacking a point of moral explosion,” so only direct action could change the system. “It will take extremism to create gradualism,” he advised.¹¹

Coinciding with the increased awareness of the poor coming out of the Johnson administration’s “war on poverty,” SDS activists believed that their new project could be both relevant and effective. Their program, however, diverged sharply from the Great Society plans

of the liberal establishment. SDS activists developed ERAP programs in various cities-- Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Louisville, Newark, Philadelphia, and others--in the summer of 1964 but often had trouble working within the established communities. Whereas the college students had an intellectual commitment to reform the corporate liberal state, poor people in ERAP areas were concerned with local issues such as sanitation, education, health care, or decent housing. In Cleveland, possibly the most successful ERAP city, activists led by Sharon Jeffrey organized a tenants' union and a welfare rights organization, but those soon faded as the local police "red squad" harassed the tenants' union and the aims of the welfare mothers were not wholly compatible with those of students trying to apply the writings of Karl Marx or Gunnar Myrdal to the near west side of Cleveland. Although the Cleveland project would last two-and-a-half years, and Tom Hayden would work on the Newark program for three years, ERAP folded in 1965, in principal measure because SDS was devoting itself to ending the war in Vietnam.

The failures of ERAP also finally convinced SDS participants of the futility of working within the liberal system. In some areas, old-line liberal groups like the Americans for Democratic Action [ADA], Congress On Racial Equality [CORE], the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP], and labor unions had supported ERAP actions initially, but those institutions were outraged by the SDS program of empowerment at the local level. Rather than become a tool of the liberal establishment, ERAP leaders hoped to establish tenant unions, voter registration projects, and welfare rights organizations to give the poor a voice, per the concept of participatory democracy. But the liberals, as Hayden put it, viewed such grassroots actions "as a problem if not a danger." In Chicago, after trying to work within the structure established by the Daley machine, ERAP attitudes toward liberals "changed from . .

. hope to . . . deepest hostility and contempt.”¹² In 1965, then, the liberal establishment was waging its war on poverty from Washington D.C., and middle-class college students were doing it in various communities. The poor, however, were without weapons in the battle.

Vietnam and the Radicalization of the New Left

Groups such as the Free Speech Movement and SDS had actually been established to work within and reform the liberal system, but as the years passed they began to see liberalism as the enemy and often became committed to overthrowing it. To some degree, this criticism of liberalism was already evident by the earlier years of the 1960s, prompted by the paternalism of Berkeley administrators, the bureaucratic nature of labor unions, or the rabid anticommunism of old-line liberal groups. Students derided “limousine liberals” who spoke of their concern for the downtrodden from their positions of privilege and folk singer Phil Ochs mocked their hypocrisy brilliantly in his song “Love Me, I’m a Liberal.” More than anything, however, it was the growing American commitment to Vietnam that caused so many activists to turn on the liberal establishment and becoming increasingly radical and militant--and occasionally violent--in the later 1960s. By the end of the decade, the New Left, which had been born as an intellectual movement to nonviolently revitalize American society, was employing the rhetoric of revolution as the besieged liberal state tried to carry on the war in Indochina and maintain control at home. In the end, New Left groups either crashed or faded away and liberalism came under a sustained backlash from the right after the frontal assault from the youthful left. Ultimately, Richard Nixon, George Wallace, Ronald Reagan and others picked up the pieces and assumed power.

The FSM, Port Huron, SDS, ERAP, other New Left ideas and institutions, and Civil Rights all took a back seat to the war in Vietnam beginning in 1965. As James Miller, the best-

known chronicler of SDS, explained: “fueled by the hostility of many American students to the war in Vietnam, the New Left after 1965 quickly mushroomed into a mass movement that aggressively challenged the legitimacy of America’s political institutions.” In turn, the earlier, “participatory democracy,” phase of activism came to seem like “an irrelevant, insufficiently radical pre-history” as the movement became singularly focused on stopping the war in Vietnam by whatever means necessary. Accordingly, in 1965 SDS had sponsored the first major demonstration against the war--in April in Washington D.C.--and began to wind down ERAP and set its sights on Vietnam. This new commitment also caused tension within the community groups in ERAP cities. The vehemence with which SDS members denounced the war turned off many of the local poor with whom they were working. While those communities may have been upset with the mayor or local police, they still had faith in the U.S. mission to help the world. As Sharon Jeffrey observed, poor people still believed that the federal government “somehow is honest, moral, and good [and] if the US was involved in a war, then it must be for good reasons.”¹³

Participatory democracy and an interracial movement of the poor could not be achieved in a liberal system that attacked Vietnamese peasants, so stopping the war became the prerequisite for any future New Left political action. As Paul Potter, president of SDS in April 1965, charged at the Washington antiwar rally, “the incredible war in Vietnam has provided the razor, the terrifying sharp cutting edge that has finally severed the last vestiges of illusion that morality and democracy are the guiding principles of American foreign policy.”¹⁴ Such an analysis was becoming typical, and from that time forward SDS and other groups shifted their priorities from reform at home to antiwar activity, becoming more angry and radical in the process and giving

rise to new levels of protest on campus and elsewhere throughout the country.

Once more, the universities became the flash point for protest. Student radicals pointed out that many of their professors were conducting research for the pentagon and CIA, their scientists were creating napalm and herbicides, their administrators were acting like slum lords in surrounding neighborhoods where the schools owned property, and their admissions offices admitted few nonwhite applicants. “Viewed from within,” as Emily Rosenberg and Norman Rosenberg observed, “the multiversity seemed to offer mind-numbing courses and senseless regimentation. Seen as part of liberal society, it appeared implicated in the war and racism.”¹⁵ From coast to coast, then, campuses began to erupt. In October 1965, tens of thousands of students nationwide participated in antiwar demonstrations; others picketed their draft boards and burned selective service cards. At a University of Colorado football game, students made a peace sign out of flash cards at halftime. In Berkeley, students staged a “peace invasion” of the Oakland Army base only to be met and attacked by the Hell’s Angels, who told them to “go back to Russia, you fucking Communists.” Despite such outrages, or maybe because of them, SDS became even more popular, with the number of chapters doubling to 80 that summer alone and, as the war escalated, growing even more. “I didn’t go to college in 1965 expecting to become a radical,” Judy Smith, a young student, related, “but I didn’t expect the Vietnam War to develop the way it did either. . . For [my friends and I] it would have been immoral to just go on with college and career plans when the war was still going on. If you weren’t part of the solution, you were part of the problem.”¹⁶

At Columbia University, in one of the most painful episodes in the 1960s, students decided to attack the problem head on. Columbia had an active SDS chapter--in 1966 members

had picketed military and CIA recruiters, confronted Marine representatives on campus, and demanded that their class rankings not be handed over to local draft boards--and in 1968 it shut down the university. Columbia's president, Grayson Kirk, was patrician and conservative, a member of the Board of Directors of Consolidated Edison, IBM, and the Institute for Defense Analysis. In 1967, Kirk had banned all indoor demonstrations on campus and his administration was continuing to take disciplinary actions against female students for "living with a boyfriend." The final straw, however, came as a result of Columbia's ownership of property near campus in Morningside Heights, a minority residential area near Harlem. Kirk decided to build a new gymnasium in the neighborhood, prompting SDS and other student activists to protest the further intrusion into the black community--"Gym Crow Must Go," was a frequent cry. Six SDS members, led by chapter President Mark Rudd, defied the ban on protests, holding a demonstration inside Low Library, and Kirk suspended them. Rudd, in an open letter to the Columbia president, called for the "opening shot in a war of liberation" and screamed out "up against the wall, motherfucker, this is a stick-up."¹⁷

While few expected the Revolution to begin on an Ivy League campus, the situation was heating up. In late April, with patience thin on all sides, the upheaval began. SDS and black students, to protest the gym construction, held a rally and marched to the library, where they occupied Kirk's office, rifling through his files, smoking his cigars, and drinking his sherry. Within days, over a thousand students had joined the protest, "liberated" three more buildings, and created communes inside. Local supporters sent food and medical students opened up clinics. To the students it was "participatory democracy" come to life. Likening themselves to Vietnamese nationalists or third-world revolutionaries, they too were fighting against the

imperial, liberal American state and, in this case, they had shut down Columbia University. Soon, intellectuals and celebrities rushed to see the rebellion as it unfolded. Norman Mailer, Dwight MacDonald, Susuan Sontag , and radical leaders Hayden, Abbie Hoffman, H. Rap Brown, and Stokeley Carmichael arrived. Everywhere, one could hear the music of the Grateful Dead and, of course, Bob Dylan.

The apparent bliss would not last long, however. Kirk called in plainclothes police, who attacked sympathetic faculty with billy clubs. After a temporary truce and a series of meetings, Kirk this time called in law enforcement again. About 300 students and faculty tried to peacefully halt the police, but to no avail as they forced their way past the crowd and into the buildings. Students offered nonviolent resistance, singing “We Shall Overcome” or the National Anthem, but not fighting back. Police attacked nonetheless and, as an African-American student, Dionision Pabon, recalled, “I was called nigger [and] kicked in the head, face, back, stomach and groin. It felt like a herd of horses, instead of hooves--iron spikes.”¹⁸ Kirk had played into the students’ hands. More members of the Columbia community, even conservatives, were so repulsed by Kirk’s decision to call in a police attack that they too joined the strike. When the administration decided to suspend several student leaders, others again occupied Hamilton Hall. Kirk again called in the working-class police, who again responded violently against the children of privilege. The university cancelled final exams and Columbia was at a standstill. Administrators did announce that they would suspend plans for the gym construction, but the damage had been done. The Columbia uprising marked a dramatic and somewhat frightening step in the New Left’s efforts to change America.

At Columbia, SDS faded away after 1968, in good measure because most of its leaders

had been suspended. But the actions in Morningside Heights had a national impact, contributing to a hardening of attitudes on the right and left alike. Many moderates and conservatives, and not a few self-proclaimed liberals, turned against the youth movement, seeing it as nihilistic and extremist, and often violent. Many students, on the other hand, opted out of the liberal system and saw no hope in trying to reform essentially corrupt institutions. Many, additionally, were lured by the romance of rebellion--per Hayden's call for "two, three, many Columbias"--and students more than ever began to identify with Ho, Mao Zedong, Che' Guevara, Fidel Castro, Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X and other icons of revolution. As students in Paris, Prague, and Mexico City had uprisings in 1968 as well, the idea of a global youth rebellion did not seem so far-fetched. Student protests at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and at Berkeley prompted the governors to call the National Guard to campus. Black students at Cornell University--harassed by cross burnings and bomb threats--carried shotguns and wore bandoliers on campus. At Ohio State, the National Guard appeared on campus in 1968 to discourage antiwar activity and when students in 1970 took over High Street the famed Buckeye football coach Woody Hayes rushed onto the scene to yell to students to go home. In Berkeley, police fired on protestors at "People's Park," killing one, blinding another, and wounding a hundred others. Amid the mayhem, California Governor Ronald Reagan took a hard line, announcing that "if there's going to be a bloodbath, let it begin here."

In Madison, student radicals bombed the Army Mathematics Research Center, a symbol of the military-university complex, killing a post-doctoral student who was studying inside. A group of militant SDS members splintered from the main organization and formed the *Weathermen*--a name taken from a line in Dylan's *Subterranean Homesick Blues*: "you don't

need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows”--which was committed to violent attacks on the police, legal system, and political leaders, and which conducted the 1969 “Days of Rage” action in Chicago. All told, from late 1969 to early 1970 alone, the Weathermen and other groups attempted about 250 bombings across the country, and often staged other assaults on symbols of the system, most notably the ROTC building at Kent State. The hope of participatory democracy had given way to the glamor of revolution. Spurred on by their own frustrations and the repressive nature of university administrations and politicians, many radicals saw violence, not empowerment, as the answer to state containment. But they were operating in an inherently anti-revolutionary atmosphere. Student radicals were marginalized, not identifying with or being accepted by the masses of working poor or minorities who would be essential to any large-scale action. And to those who advocated “law and order,” violent activism offered proof that all dissent had to be stopped. The New Left was in disarray, organizationally and morally conflicted. “In the illumination of that bombing [at Madison],” Todd Gitlin wrote, “the Movement knew sin.”¹⁹

Vietnam, “Corporate Liberalism,” and the Shortcomings of the Great Society

Ultimately, the New Left did not create a participatory democracy, change the liberal system, or force LBJ to end the war in Vietnam. It did, nonetheless, have a tremendous impact on the politics of the 1960s. By “speaking truth to power”--as activists in that decade described it--FSM, SDS and others forced the nation to confront many of the problems that had previously been ignored, developed a critique of the liberal order that would become powerful and widespread by 1968, and they made the nature of the war in Vietnam the dominant issue of the day. Despite outright hostility and repression from the media, law enforcement, and the political

establishment, young people and committed activists exposed many of the inconsistencies of American society and demanded accountability from their leaders. But they did not overthrow the system; it was the liberals themselves who did that. By the end of the decade, the liberal hopes so eloquently pronounced at the beginning of the Kennedy years were little more than empty rhetoric. After nearly a decade of paying prices and bearing burdens, Americans were only too willing to listen to Richard Nixon, George Wallace and others attack the liberal system. And the Great Society foundered, the victim of the commitment to Indochina and the structural limits of “corporate liberalism.

At the end of July 1965, Lyndon Johnson thought about his most recent accomplishments--including passage of Medicare, education, Voting Rights, and antipoverty legislation--and proclaimed it “the most productive and most historic legislative week in Washington during this century.”²⁰ Taking stock after he left office, LBJ pointed to further successes of his Great Society: 8.5 million jobs created; unemployment down to 3.3 percent, 40 percent less than in 1963; corporate profits and workers’ pay risen by 50 percent; average working class incomes higher by over \$500; and federal revenues up by \$70 billion. Federal programs covering health, education, poverty, the elderly, food stamps, AFDC, and Social Security without question had contributed to a significant improvement in the quality of life for many poor, who could be educated and afford health care and legal services for the first time. LBJ’s Great Society “improved the everyday lives of millions of Americans.” Looking back, the president said he “would not have changed much. I would have made the same decision to recommend a guns-and-butter budget to the congress.”²¹

Despite such successes, Johnson himself lamented that nearly a million women lacked

prenatal care and infant mortality rates were depressingly high, poor children still needed better educational facilities and adequate meals, and too many Americans still went without quality medical care. In large measure, such failings stemmed from the shift in national priorities away from the War on Poverty and to the war in Vietnam. Indeed, during that same “productive and historic” week in July 1965, the president also noticed that the “lowering cloud of Vietnam”—he had just committed 80,000 troops to Indochina, essentially “Americanizing” the war—was affecting his political agenda. Still, LBJ was optimistic that the public would continue to support federal spending on antipoverty programs *and* for the war. “This nation is mighty enough, its society is healthy enough,” he observed in 1966, “to pursue our goals in the rest of the world while still building a Great Society here at home.”²²

Ultimately, however, Americans would not support costly “wars” on two fronts. Although liberals in the House of Representatives and Senate had secured passage of the major Great Society bills, there were still significant political groupings—conservatives, Republicans, southerners—opposed to the federal expansion and spending on “welfare” programs. And, economically, Vietnam was siphoning away resources that LBJ had hoped to commit to his antipoverty crusade. Indeed, the war was calling into question America’s post-World War II hegemony in the global political economy. Because of Vietnam, an already-existing deficit in the country’s balance-of-payments—the amount of American dollars being sent abroad in investment, tourism, and, especially, military spending—grew much worse. In connection with that, America’s gold reserves began to decline dramatically as well. At the end of the Second World War, the United States had created the so-called Bretton Woods system in which the U.S. dollar was established as an international currency within the gold standard. Foreign currencies could

be traded for gold at fixed rates of \$35 per ounce, thereby ensuring stability in world financial markets.

By 1965-1966, however, the war was destabilizing both the American and foreign economies. At home, the payments deficits grew as spending on the war approached \$25 billion per annum. Gold stocks, which already had dropped from \$23 billion in 1957 to \$16 billion in 1962, dwindled as well. Because foreign central banks could not adjust their currencies--Bretton Woods demanded fixed rates pegged to the dollar--they were paying higher prices for American goods because the war was causing inflation in the United States. Thus foreign banks began to cash in their dollars for gold as a hedge against inflation, withdrawing \$1.7 billion in specie in 1965 alone. The situation worsened as American spending in Vietnam grew; U.S. Treasury Department officials estimated that balance-of-payments deficits would soar due "entirely to our intensified efforts in Southeast Asia," while another \$200 million in red ink was likely in 1967 due to the war. By late 1967, there was a full-blown monetary crisis as Britain devalued its pound sterling and European nations, especially France, began to call for a change in the U.S.-dominated world economy. French President Charles DeGaulle warned of an "American takeover of our businesses" resulting from the "exportation of inflated dollars." At the same time, deficits in 1967 rose to \$7 billion, triple the previous rate for the year.

By 1968, at the same point at the Tet Offensive, the world economy verged on crisis. Deficits grew by over \$300 million a week and gold losses amounted to almost \$600 million in the first weeks of March 1968 alone. Should European banks continue to trade their dollars for gold, it could trigger a devaluation of the dollar, which in turn could ignite a series of foreign currency devaluations. A situation like the world depression of the late 1920s and 1930s seemed

wholly possible. Finally, LBJ stepped in to stop the bleeding. He temporarily froze all payments of gold and, more importantly, began to take measures to slow down the war in Vietnam and military spending; as a first step he rejected the request for 200,000 more troops, which would have cost another \$25 billion. As Arthur Okun, the president's principal financial officer, explained, unless world markets had confidence in the dollar American prosperity was at great risk, and Vietnam was at the root of such considerations. American leaders, for the first time since 1945, had discovered the limits of its economic strength and liberal system. After the Second World War, the United States had been able to create jobs and opportunity at home while being active, and often interventionist, abroad due to its consistent economic growth, and in the process it established an effective and profitable liberal order at home and internationally. But the war exposed the difficulties involved in the American mission, as the costs of a major military effort abroad cut into LBJ's plans to wage war on poverty in the United States. With deficits going up and gold going out, liberal Keynesian economics came under assault and the conservative counterattack on the Great Society grew more vigorous while, globally, America could not direct world economies as it previously had. Maybe the *Pax Americana* had not ended, but it was surely on the wane.²³

Clearly, the war had a significantly negative impact on LBJ's plans to help the poor, but even without the U.S. intervention into Vietnam there were a good many structural obstacles to effective reform in the 1960s. The American system of *corporate liberalism*, as leftist scholars and activists described it, made it unlikely if not impossible for the government to address the basic problems facing its people. Originally developed and discussed by theorists associated with the journal *Studies on the Left*, the radical scholars Gabriel Kolko and William Appleman

Williams, student activists, and especially SDS, the concept of corporate liberalism became the key analytical idea within the New Left and offered a comprehensive explanation for both the Vietnam War and the shortcomings of the Great Society. By 1968 establishment figures like Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were addressing this concept as well. To critics on the left, the real barrier to democracy was not the right wing, but infact the liberals, namely corporate liberals. Wholly supportive of large corporations and defensive of America's unequal class structure, liberals believed in the primacy and importance of big businesses and pursued policies to extend their influence. The goal of liberal reform, therefore, was to create a stable business environment and enable the biggest firms to withstand competition and stave off all but mild labor demands for better wages and conditions. As JFK admitted to an audience of corporate leaders, the government's tax revenues and "thus our success are dependent upon your profits and your success--and . . . far from being natural enemies, Government and business are necessary allies."²⁴

Like the president, movement leaders too recognized the convergence of state and corporate interests, but did not share Kennedy's optimism about the arrangement. Dick Flacks, an SDS leader in the early 1960s, explained that "the people who are running society are the corporate liberals. They want to stabilize, not repress 'Corporate liberalism' meant reforms made by the power elite in the interests of social stability [not] redistribution and social equality." Even liberal groups, especially labor, bought into this system as their leadership was brought into the halls of Democratic Party power and divorced from the rank-and-file. "These groups," to Flacks, "had been separated from the real base of power."²⁵ Paul Potter developed the concept further and introduced it to a mass New Left audience at the April 1965 antiwar rally. There

Potter denounced the “system” that waged war against the Vietnamese, denied fundamental human rights to minorities at home, allowed millions to remain impoverished, created “faceless and terrible bureaucracies . . . where people spend their lives and do their work,” and “consistently puts material values before human values” yet “still persists in calling itself free and still persists in finding itself fit to police the world.”²⁶

“We must name that system . . . describe it, analyze it, understand it, and change it,” Potter thundered, in order to stop the war in Vietnam and end oppression and violence at home. Carl Oglesby, SDS president, built upon Potter’s critique at the next major antiwar action in Washington in October 1965. Oglesby denounced those officials--LBJ, McNamara, Dean Rusk, the Bundy brothers, Arthur Goldberg and others--responsible for the war, but also reminded the crowd that “they are not moral monsters. They are all honorable men. They are all liberals.” These corporate liberals, the SDS leader pointed out, “can send 200,000 young men to Vietnam to kill and die in the most dubious of wars, but it cannot send 100 voter registrars to go into Mississippi” ; were cutting funding to antipoverty programs while offering huge contracts to aerospace firms to build new planes; and talking about democracy while overthrowing Third World nationalist governments. Corporate liberalism, Oglesby concluded, “performs for the corporate state a function quite like what the Church once performed for the feudal state. It seeks to justify its burdens and protect it from change.” Instead of an Inquisition, however, McCarthyism and red-baiting were used to weed out so-called enemies, and it was all “made possible by our anti-Communist corporate liberalism.” The liberals, Todd Gitlin added, believed that “a bigger and better welfare state,” not economic restructuring and redistribution of wealth, could solve problems of social inequality, which he likened to applying “aspirin to cancer.”²⁷

The New Left, however, ultimately did not offer a popular critique of the liberal order, as SDS and other groups often became more rigid, strident, and violent. But the concept of corporate liberalism remained a highly useful analytical tool for examining the shortcomings of LBJ's programs. The Great Society, as the New Left charged, was inhibited by its own liberalism. While LBJ wanted to offer lower-income Americans "opportunity, not doles," the Great Society tended to be run, as Ted Morgan explained, "from the top down by an elite realm of decision-makers cut off from the world of their subjects, by insiders righteously unaware that their own subjectivity distorted the object of their analysis and policy."²⁸ The Johnson administration, like Clark Kerr or the clueless Grayson Kirk, thought that it knew what was best for the poor and would only work within established political structures, so it essentially was carrying out another form of liberal paternalism. Neither did its spending on social programs, though markedly expanded, reach the levels needed to address fundamental problems of poverty. Funding under the 1965 Education Act, for instance, usually went to local school boards--usually run by middle-class white conservatives or bureaucrats--who had their own agenda, namely taking care of the children from families like theirs. In a 1966 survey, about 70 percent of school district superintendents *opposed* allocating education funds on the basis of poverty, even though that was the basic intent of the program. In addition, local districts decided which schools would receive federal monies, and, not surprisingly, appropriations did not arrive at those institutions which were the poorest and most needed aid. By maintaining such a system, though, the administration did not alienate important liberal constituencies like the teachers' unions or working-class, but not poor, whites.

Similarly, the establishment of Medicare represented an accommodation between reformers

and vested interests, namely the medical community. The American Medical Association [AMA], alarming Americans that “Socialized medicine” was on the way, was paying lobbyists \$5000 a day to defeat the Medicare bill. Though it did not do so, the AMA did pressure congress to create a system that would work to doctors’ advantage. Medicare thus contained no price controls; the government would reimburse physicians and hospitals caring for the elderly for their usual fees, in effect causing medical inflation to soar as doctors and hospitals raised their prices because federal insurance was paying the bill. Medicaid had its problems as well: too few physicians participated in the system because of the paperwork involved and because the government reimbursed those doctors caring for the poor at fees below their customary level. The states, moreover, controlled benefits, so the quality of care varied widely; in Missouri, the average recipient got \$214 worth of care, but in Minnesota it amounted to \$911. Americans living in poverty but not on welfare--about 40 percent of the poor--were not eligible for Medicaid. And, as with any program of that magnitude, fraud was not uncommon.

Perhaps the best example of the failures of Great Society liberalism to address the needs of the poor came with the *Community Action Program* [CAP], part of the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act. The CAPs would develop “maximum feasible participation” among the poor. Rather than establish a bureaucracy to make decisions and administer funding, poverty-stricken communities themselves would determine where the money would be spent and organize their own programs to better their lives. Activists and residents in various poor urban areas thus set up community boards to fight their own “wars” against the local political structure. CAP boards thus began to form tenants’ unions, conduct rent strikes against slumlords, called for police

review boards composed of citizens, lobbied for educational facilities for their youth, registered the poor to vote, and engaged in other political activity that challenged the status quo. In Syracuse, New York, for instance, the famed radical community organizer Saul Alinsky helped establish a CAP which bailed out protesting welfare mothers and became involved in the mayoral election in hopes of defeating the incumbent William Walsh. When the director of the local Housing Authority learned of such CAP actions, he warned that “we are experiencing a class struggle in the traditional Karl Marx style in Syracuse, and I do not like it.”

In Philadelphia, to avoid the threat of participatory democracy, local political officials stacked the CAP boards with their political cronies, who would be sure not to rock the boat. In New York the noted black psychologist Kenneth Clark had devised HARYOU--Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited--to provide services to young African-Americans and establish neighborhood boards to educate the poor and foster institutional reform. But allies of Congressman Adam Clayton Powell took control of HARYOU and used millions of federal dollars to make sure that no community boards ever developed into political forces independent of Powell.²⁹ In major cities throughout the country, despite pleas to “let the people decide,” that pattern repeated itself. Time and again local political officials and the federal government saw community programs as a threat to their control, not as an opportunity for empowerment and progress.

Empowerment and independence were never LBJ’s purpose. Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, a liberal icon, told Sargent Shriver, whose agency ran the CAPs, to suppress the citizenry’s demands for maximum participation. But Shriver himself bluntly admitted that “we have no intention, of course, of letting . . . the poor themselves . . . ‘run the programs.’”³⁰ Big city

Democratic mayors such as John Shelley of San Francisco and Sam Yorty of Los Angeles attacked the CAPs as well, claiming that they were “fostering class struggle” by empowering the poor. And no one attacked the community programs more than Chicago’s Mayor Richard Daley, who called CAP a “prize piece of political pornography.” Daley would not tolerate the poor making decisions in “his city” but he also used the program to his advantage, taking federal monies and creating jobs for friends and political allies. When representatives of a local housing group in one of Chicago’s slums (where a Chicago politician and Daley supporter owned property) criticized the mayor’s actions, Daley contacted LBJ, who put an end to the experiment in popular democracy in Chicago. Daley and Johnson were never willing to tolerate a situation in which the government would pay community organizers who turned around and criticized the local political system. Liberal politicians thought it was far more important to maintain patronage among established constituencies than to politicize the poor and underclass, who would almost certainly have a different agenda. To the president and Daley, then, reform essentially meant buying off established liberal elites, not empowering the poor. When the “kooks and sociologists” in the CAPs, as LBJ called them, tried to redistribute wealth or power, they had exceeded the limits that corporate liberalism had established.

The failure of the CAPs illustrated the structural shortcomings of the Great Society. Though many Americans’ lives, education and health may have improved, far too often federal funding did not reach those who really needed it and was too limited to make a substantial difference. Despite LBJ’s commitment and billions of dollars, never did the War on Poverty effectively address the structural needs of the poor. It tried to fix poor people rather than a system of poverty. Many critics--on the political right, in the “vital center,” and among blue-

collar Democrats--moreover believed that the government was simply giving money away to people too lazy to work, even though then, as now, the majority of welfare recipients held jobs. Indeed, one of the greatest failures of the War on Poverty was its inability to help the working poor. Almost half of black families still earned less than \$5000 a year; 18 percent of all families continued to live in poverty; and three out of every four Americans below the poverty line never received any assistance. Structural factors such as the decline in America's coal and industrial sectors, foreign competition, agricultural mechanization, or northward migration from Mexico had created economic dislocation for millions, but LBJ's plans did not include them. "Unwilling to back programs that challenged local political bosses, administration officials never even considered undertaking the struggle with major corporations to address the structural causes of poverty." The president's "unconditional war on poverty," in the end, "turned out to be not much more than a skirmish."³¹

Sundown for the Liberals--1968

The legacy of the Great Society--mixed at best--by 1968 posed a great challenge to Lyndon Johnson in part and liberals nationally as well. Within the course of that year, the American political landscape would be rocked by a series of upheavals and crises that would shatter the liberal order and alter the political context of American society. To be sure, the liberal reforms of the JFK and LBJ years did not disappear and indeed continued and in some part grew into the 1970s. But just as certainly, the heyday of liberalism had ended. Economic crisis, the Tet Offensive, political assassinations, labor problems, a grassroots movement of the poor, infighting among liberal groups, and a tumultuous presidential campaign all contributed to the anguish of that year and led to a backlash against liberals. After 1968, American life would be

much different than it had been earlier in the decade.

The first indications that the year would bring new problems came early. In January 1968 the Viet Cong began its Tet holiday Offensive, creating a political crisis in Washington D.C. as LBJ had to scramble to explain how the enemy could conduct such widespread operations just months after the American military commander had assured the country that things were going well and there was “light at the end of the tunnel.” At that same point, the Balance of Payments and Gold crises erupted, forcing the president to take measures to reform the world financial structure and alter American hegemony. Adding insult to injury, North Korea seized a U.S. Navy ship, the *Pueblo*, took the crew hostage, and charged them with espionage. America’s leadership in the world, militarily and economically, was under attack. Vietnamese peasants could attack American installations and forces apparently at will and European nations were demanding U.S. action to prevent economic collapse and depression. Liberalism, the defining principle in the western war against fascism, in the restructured global political economy after 1945, and in the containment of radicalism abroad and at home, no longer seemed so effective a way to run the world.

At home, the crisis was more grave. The traditional liberal alliance between labor, blacks, Jews, and progressives came undone, the victim of attacks from New Left and right. Earlier in the decade, activists had envisioned a strong labor movement as the key to democratic reform, and unions had supported the earliest efforts to organize SDS and ERAP programs. But by the latter 1960s, labor and the left were at odds. Culturally, many working-class Americans were turned off by the angry rhetoric and lifestyles of the young; hardhats in New York City, for instance, even attacked an antiwar demonstration at one point. To many blue-collar and middle-

class Democrats, the New Left and Civil Rights movements were a threat to their own livelihoods and security. “Yeah, I helped the War on Poverty,” critics would joke, “I threw a hand grenade at a bum.”³² Institutionally, the left began to view labor as a static, bureaucratic giant, beholden to the Democratic Party and afraid of the rank-and-file, and the AFL-CIO continued to strongly support the war in Vietnam. Ironically, many white voters bolted from the Democrats because they saw liberalism as a tool to provide handouts to minorities at the expense of hard-working Caucasians.

Labor’s own internal racial divisions became more public and troublesome as well. Indeed, the major labor issues of 1968 involved non-white workers in non-industrial economic sectors. In March, Cesar Chávez, head of the United States Farm Workers Organizing Committee [USFWOC], began a hunger strike to gain recognition of his union, consisting mostly of Mexican- and Filipino-Americans, by grape growers in California. When the farmers began to negotiate with the USFWOC, Chávez and his associates still had to contend with the Teamsters Union, which, in its typical fashion, offered “sweetheart contracts” to the grape growers that did little for the workers. Nationally, liberals, labor, and religious leaders supported a Chávez-led boycott of grapes, and later lettuce, as a way to force the growers to deal with the FWOC, but national liberals, with the exception of Robert Kennedy, did not join the fray, thereby allowing the reactionary Governor Reagan, the growers, and the Teamsters to intimidate and bully the farm workers. African-Americans had their issues with organized labor and liberals as well. Black leaders would often charge that unions were protecting the jobs and incomes of white workers at the expense of blacks, while labor, a big supporter of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights movement in the early 1960s, was diverging from the black community later in the

decade. When the Keynesian economy was growing, it was easier for labor to support expanded rights for minorities; but by 1968, the economic pie was shrinking and unions were not feeling so charitable about expanding opportunities for blacks or the poor.

As if the possibility of a mass of disaffected workers and poor people protesting liberal inactivity and withholding support to the Party did not upset liberals enough, the Democrats themselves were involved in a kind of civil war in early 1968. During the previous Fall, a liberal activist from New York, Allard Lowenstein, began to seek a liberal candidate to run for president in the coming election. His first choice to be the “dump Johnson” candidate was a senator from New York and brother of LBJ’s predecessor, Robert F. Kennedy [RFK]. But Kennedy was reluctant to enter a race that he seemed unlikely to win, so Lowenstein kept looking. Finally, Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, a critic of Johnson’s Vietnam policies and the senate’s greatest wit (when Michigan Governor George Romney changed from supporting the war to opposing it, claiming he had earlier been “brainwashed,” McCarthy suggested that “a light rinse would have done”) entered the contest. Johnson and the Democratic establishment did not really take McCarthy’s candidacy seriously, but the senator and an army of young activists who were “clean with Gene”--they had shaved and began wearing more traditional clothing--undertook an impressive grassroots effort throughout New Hampshire, the site of the first presidential primary in March 1968. Because of their efforts, and the shock of Tet, McCarthy made an unusually strong showing, garnering 42 percent of the vote against the sitting president. Kennedy, sensing Johnson’s vulnerability, then jumped into the race. With the war raging and his political career crumbling, Lyndon Johnson made a televised address to the nation on 31 March and ended on a stunning note, withdrawing from the presidential race. LBJ, like so many others, had become a

casualty of the war in Vietnam and the War on Poverty.

Bobby Kennedy, who earlier in life had redbaited with Joe McCarthy and served as his brother's "ruthless" lieutenant on political matters, by 1968 was the last best hope of the liberals. Distraught by Vietnam and disillusioned by the elite nature of reform, RFK sought a new kind of politics himself. To Kennedy, the Democrats had to forge a new political coalition. Organized labor and the south were no longer reliable, but blacks, working-class whites, and "the kids" were. "Poverty," he came to believe, "is closer to the root of the problem than color," so the liberals needed to show that the "Negroes and the poor whites . . . have common interests."³³ Bobby Kennedy, like the New Left, Chávez, King and others, was talking about *class*, a concept usually ignored or repressed in political discourse in the United States. And he began to practice what he preached. Though it alienated big growers and gained him little support, Kennedy went to California to meet with Chávez and express his solidarity with the migrant (and thus non-voting) farm workers. RFK, as Chávez saw it, looked at life "through the eyes of the poor. . . It was like he was ours." He reached out to inner-city blacks--lamenting that "today in America, we are two worlds"-- and, upon hearing of King's death deeply moved a crowd of African-Americans in Indiana with his heartfelt plea for racial cooperation to "remove the stain of bloodshed from our land." Vine Deloria, a Native American activist, believed that "spiritually, he was an Indian!"³⁴ Even "radicals" who had given up on the system were being drawn to his campaign. Perhaps participatory democracy could be realized after all!

In early June, after winning the California primary and promising a fight for the nomination at the Democratic convention, Kennedy spoke of such dreams: "What I think is quite clear, is that what has been going on within the United States over a period of the last three years

. . . the divisions, whether it's between blacks and whites, between the poor and more affluent, or between age groups or on the war in Vietnam--is that we can start to work together." Looking ahead, RFK rallied his supporters with what would be his final words: "On to Chicago and let's win there." As he left the stage, he was gunned down by Sirhan Sirhan, a Jordanian nationalist angered by Kennedy's pro-Israel positions. Coming on the heels of the King killing and other crises of that year, RFK's assassination plunged Americans into despair. Blacks, the poor, and youth now had no one to turn to for leadership. Even Tom Hayden, who had little faith in the liberal system, was shaken, lamenting that Kennedy's coffin held "all that remained of last night's hopes of the poor." Sitting in the back of St. Patrick's Cathedral clutching a Cuban cap at the Kennedy funeral mass, he wept openly.³⁵

While it was not likely that Kennedy could have seized the nomination from Hubert Humphrey--for the Vice President had the support of organized labor and the party's establishment--he probably would have done much more to prevent the fiasco in Chicago in early 1968. Only Kennedy could speak the language of equality, justice, and public morality that had moved liberals in the 1960s. With Kennedy, and King, gone, no leader who could unify the nation appeared on the scene. The old Democratic coalition was tearing at the seams and the schism would worsen in the latter part of the year, helping to further daze liberals and create a political vacuum that the right-wing would fill. That fall, in a preview of future conflicts among traditional liberal constituencies, blacks and Jews associated with the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school district in New York City engaged in a virulent dispute over community control of local schools. Ocean Hill-Brownsville was derided as a "tiny piece of urban blight" and the schools were a mess. Beginning in 1966, black activists demanded more control over local education,

arguing that they had a vested interest in reforming a system in which the majority of students were black but over 50 percent of the teachers were Jewish. John Lindsey, the WASP mayor of New York, sided with the black activists while the liberal United Federation of Teachers [UFT] and its President

Albert Shanker opposed plans to decentralize and restructure the schools to accommodate African-American complaints. Inevitably, blacks and Jews were at odds. When the UFT went on strike in 1967, many black teachers crossed the picket lines and taught classes as a way of showing that they were in control of their own schools. Throughout the Fall of 1968, all of New York's public schools were on strike and the labor conflict turned into a racial conflict as blacks and Jews grew increasingly bitter toward each other. By the time the dispute ended, with blacks in control of the local schools and Shanker and the UFT still representing the teachers, the old liberal coalition was badly damaged.

The various crises of 1968 to that point served as prologue to the presidential election. The Democrat's nominee was Vice President Humphrey, a traditional liberal who was similar politically to LBJ. Another Democrat, the segregationist governor of Alabama, George Wallace, was also running. Disgusted with liberal attempts to help blacks and the poor, Wallace was challenging the Democratic establishment from the right. And for the Republicans, Richard Nixon was their standard-bearer. Eisenhower's Vice President for eight years and the candidate who barely lost to JFK in 1960, Nixon cleverly exploited the liberals' crises that year and won the election with a little over 40 percent of the vote in the three-man race. But if Wallace's votes were added to Nixon's, conservatives gained well over half the vote, a huge renunciation of the liberals just four years after LBJ had won nearly two-thirds of the national vote. Humphrey

received only 35 percent of the white vote and 30 percent of whites who had voted for LBJ in 1964 did not vote Democratic this time around. Both Wallace and Nixon were responsible for this political transformation. The Alabama governor attacked both parties, complaining that “there’s not a dime’s worth of difference” between the two but especially promising that the “intellectual morons” and the “theoreticians” in the Democratic Party were “going to get some of those liberal smiles knocked off their faces.”³⁶

Nixon likewise took advantage of the Democratic-liberal identification with blacks, the poor, and youth. Basing his campaign on a “secret plan” to end the war in Vietnam and restoring “law and order” at home--a thinly-veiled use of racial buzzwords which implied a crackdown on blacks--Nixon reached out to disaffected white voters. His campaign ads flashed images of angry youth and other disaffected Americans while Nixon, in a voiceover, promised to “rebuild respect for law across this country.” The Democrats, with Vietnam, their halfhearted efforts at reform, and the disastrous Chicago convention behind them only made it easier for their opponents to attack successfully. Nixon, who had been one of liberalism’s biggest enemies as a redbaiting representative and Vice President, now held the highest office in the land. Though as president he did not dismantle the liberal state, Nixon’s election did signify that the high hopes of JFK’s inaugural, the dreams of a Great Society, and the federal War on Poverty were ending, giving way to the blunt realities of the liberals’ failures in Vietnam and at home. Ironically, the groups that had done so much to expose those failures--youth, blacks, disaffected working-class whites--were now looking at a sworn enemy of the liberal state enter the White House and they were further outside the mainstream than ever before in that decade.

Concluding a moving eulogy to his brother in St. Patrick's Cathedral, Senator Edward Kennedy repeated one of RFK's favorite sayings: "some men see things as they are and ask why. I dream things that never were, and say why not?" Those eloquent words could serve as a requiem for the 1960s as well. Throughout the decade, liberal politicians and intellectuals saw poverty, inequality and racial conflict and asked why; others dreamed of a new politics of democracy and inclusion and wondered why not. Neither question was ever satisfactorily answered. Taking advantage of the nation's great wealth, liberals had tried to create a Great Society, but did not provide adequate funding or channel aid to those who needed it most. Johnson's War on Poverty, in the end, consisted more of "poor laws" than real welfare. But liberal ideology would allow no more than that. Participatory democracy and empowerment--the mantra of the New Left--threatened the established order. Maintaining the status quo, along with trying to contain a growing and grueling war in Vietnam, dominated the liberal political agenda and ultimately undermined effective reform. People's lives had improved in the 1960s, legislation to improve health care and education and measures to reduce poverty had made an impact, but those who needed help most were most likely to be excluded, and the social and economic structure that had created the problems in the first place was not being addressed. Critics of the liberal state thus attacked it firmly and effectively, and by 1968 few people even mentioned the "Great Society" anymore.

Those critics of liberalism were stifled as well. Rhetoric about, and experiments in, participatory democracy finally crashed as students in the New Left could not identify with the poor and could not survive political repression, and, most importantly, had shifted priorities to fight the war in Vietnam, becoming far more militant and alienated along the way. Their "new

kind of politics,” involving popular democracy and community empowerment, could not survive the bureaucratic assault of liberal institutions or the Vietnam War. Though the New Left had done much to deligitimize liberalism, when that ideology was rocked in 1968 the fragmented left was not there to offer alternative leadership, but George Wallace and Richard Nixon were. The great hope and promise of a liberal world had all but evaporated by then, though liberal reforms hung on. Robert Frost could not have known about the eventual scope of Vietnam or the Great Society, but he had presciently described the coming decade on that cold January day in 1961: “the deed of gift” was indeed “many deeds of war.”

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3. Johnson, The Vantage Point, 213.
4. Public Papers of the President: Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965, 813-4.
5. In David Farber, The Age of Great Dreams: America in the 1960s (New York, 1994) 194.
6. In Morgan, The Sixties Experience, 115.
7. In David Burner, Making Peace with the Sixties (Princeton, 1996), 140; and Morgan, The Sixties Experience, 114.
8. In Farber, Age of Great Dreams, 196.
9. James Miller, Democracy Is In the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago (New York 1987), 13.
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11. In Miller, Democracy Is In the Streets, 189.
12. In Matusow, Unraveling, 316.
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15. Norman L. Rosenberg and Emily S. Rosenberg, In Our Time: America Since World War II (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1995), 171.
16. In Terry Anderson, The Movement and the Sixties (New York, 1995), 141, 160.
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25. In Miller, Democracy Is In the Streets, 172.
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29. Matusow, Unraveling, 248-60.
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31. The American Social History Project, Who Built America? (New York, 1992), 2:555.
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33. In Steigerwald, The Sixties and the End of Modern America, 31.
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