



Module 3 - Social Movements on the Homefront: 1950s and 1960s

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Module 3 Learning Objectives

- Understand the roots of the Civil Rights Movement
- Discuss how the Vietnam War impacted the Civil Rights Movement
- Understand the motivations for the Anti-War Movement
- Discuss how the Vietnam War impacted the Anti-War Movement

Roots of the Civil Rights Movement

After the Civil War ended in 1865, the period known as Reconstruction began, which lasted until 1877. Three important amendments were passed in this period. The 13th Amendment abolished slavery, but allowed for forced servitude for criminals. The 14th Amendment granted citizenship to anyone born in the United States, included the newly freed slaves. The 15th Amendment granted voting rights to black men, causing a schism in the women's suffrage movement as women were not granted the right to vote until 1920.



When slavery ended in 1877, the federal government essentially provided no oversight for Southern states, leading to an era known as Jim Crow. During this period, which lasted from the end of Reconstruction until the mid 1950s, saw southern states severely limiting the civil rights of black citizens, despite the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments. For example, after the 13th Amendment was passed, southern landowners now had no free labor force and had to begin paying for labor. As the southern economy was in tatters after the Civil War, landowners sought cheap labor options. As the 13th Amendment allowed for forced servitude of criminals, southern states began to create laws known as Black Codes. An example of a black code was making it illegal to not have a job, so an unemployed black man would be considered a vagrant and would be imprisoned. [Click here to read more about South Carolina black codes.](#) He could then be exploited for free labor - essentially putting slaves back on the plantations.

Southern states also limited the rights of black men, and later black women to vote by creating poll taxes and creating literacy tests, designed to keep the black population from voting. The KKK intimidates black men who did try to vote by using violence to

deter them from registering. By the mid-1950's, the stage was set for the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement.

The event that historians often reference as the beginning of the movement is the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. In 1897, the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision stated

that public segregation was legal as long as facilities were “separate but equal.”

As you can imagine, southern states did not fund black schools and institutions at the same level as white schools and institutions, leading to deep inequalities. The 1954

Brown decision forced the

integration of schools, which Southern lawmakers did not respond well to. Click here to

read the Southern Manifesto, which was the reaction of Southern lawmakers to the *Brown* decision.

Following the *Brown* decision, the murder of Emmett Till in the summer of 1955 is another key event cited as contributing to the start of the movement. Emmett Till was a black 14 year old kid from Chicago, visiting family in Mississippi. He was accused of whistling at a white woman, who later told her husband. Her husband and an accomplice kidnapped Till and murdered him and threw his body in the river. Interestingly, the woman who

accused him of whistling at her later refuted that testimony. The two murderers were found not guilty by an all white jury. [While this video is not required for this module, if](#)





[you are interested in learning more about Till, this documentary from PBS provides a good background on this event.](#)

As the Civil Rights Movement continued through the late 1950s and early 1960s, we know that the United States was sending more and more advisors to the country. As the war intensified, so did the Civil Rights Movement. Consider what black soldiers must have felt – they went to Vietnam either as draftees or volunteers and then faced racial discrimination after risking their lives in a war zone. In my ground classes, I play a film for the class called “Bloods of Nam” that gives the perspective of black soldiers in Vietnam. While it’s not required for this module, [here is a link to it if you are interested in viewing it.](#)

Civil rights leaders had strong opinions of the role of black soldiers in the Vietnam War. In July 1965, Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) members issued a statement on the Vietnam War that black soldiers should not “fight in Vietnam for the white man’s freedom until all Negro people are free in Mississippi.” The draft had a major impact on the black population and other low income populations. The average age of a soldier in Vietnam was 19, compared to 26 in WWII. Consider this – you could be drafted into the war but not be old enough to vote as the voting age was 21. Due to this, the 26th Amendment was passed in 1971 lowering the voting age to 18, showing how the Vietnam War was already impacting American society. Prior to 1969 and the draft lottery, draft deferments were given to college students, so this means that less affluent and less educated men were a disproportionate percentage of combat troops. Contrary to popular belief, only about 30% of soldiers in Vietnam were drafted – the rest were volunteers. However, consider that a lot of soldiers volunteered to be able to pick



the branch they served in as most draftees served in Army infantry units. In 1969, a draft lottery was instituted that chose men based off birth dates.

Malcolm X was the first major civil rights leader to speak out against the war, but his life was cut short when he was assassinated in February 1965. Martin Luther King Jr. began to speak out against the war in 1965 and he linked the war to the oppression of the poor and the global oppressiveness of capitalism. In April, 1967, MLK gave a speech about Vietnam entitled "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence." This speech does not get as much attention as his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, but I think it's a pivotal speech regarding Vietnam. [As part of this module, please click here to access the speech. This page has the audio and text of the speech](#), so you can choose to listen or read it. However, as it was a speech by MLK, who was a masterful orator, I highly recommend you listen to it.

Here is an excerpt: Since I am a preacher by trade, I suppose it is not surprising that I have seven major reasons for bringing Vietnam into the field of my moral vision. There is at the outset a very obvious and almost facile connection between the war in Vietnam and the struggle I, and

others, have been waging in America. A few years ago there was a shining moment in that struggle. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor -- both black and white -- through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the buildup in Vietnam and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America



would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.



Perhaps the more tragic recognition of reality took place when it became clear to me that the war was doing far more than devastating the hopes of the poor at home. It was sending their sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and to die in extraordinarily high proportions relative to the rest of the population. We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem. So we have been repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools. So we watch them in brutal solidarity burning the huts of a poor village, but we realize that they would never live on the same block in Detroit. I could not be silent in the face of such cruel manipulation of the poor.

The Anti-War Movement

It's impossible to understand the Vietnam War from the US perspective without addressing the anti-war movement. It's nearly impossible to win a war of attrition without the support of the public. The North Vietnamese counted on the American public growing weary of the war, and the North Vietnamese were willing to do whatever it took to win, when they knew eventually the American public would grow weary. When the war began, most Americans supported the war from a Cold War perspective of the containment of Communism. However, as the war dragged on and the American casualties consistently escalated, the American public began to rethink the US role in Vietnam. The small anti-war movement grew louder and opposed the war for moral, economic, and environmental reasons. Military spending was taking money away from domestic spending (much like the Middle East wars in the 2000s), the US was damaging the environment with Agent Orange, innocent peasants were collateral damage, and the US should remove themselves from the civil war in Vietnam. Now I want to stress that while the anti-war movement was loud and effective, there was still a large part of the population who found the anti-war demonstrators to be annoying and distracting.

There are two key events I want students to be aware of regarding the anti-war movement. At the 1968 Democratic National Convention, anti-war demonstrators



famously clashed with police outside the Convention. [Here is a link from C-Span that demonstrates this violence.](#)



Another key event most students have probably heard of is the shooting at Kent State. In April 1970, President Nixon announced the US expansion of the war into Cambodia. In response, there was an anti-war demonstration at Kent State University in Ohio in which the National Guard was mobilized. The National Guard fired into the crowd of students, killing four students. Students may be familiar with the following picture from the Kent State shooting:



1968 – A Momentous Year

While the entire decade of the 1960s was important in American history, the year 1968 was arguably the defining year of the decade.

First, we know from last week that the Tet Offensive kicked off the year of 1968 and led to an increased anti-war movement and LBJ to decline the Democratic nomination for reelection. Additionally, in 1968 that number of American soldiers in Vietnam peaked at approximately 500,000 soldiers. But there are some other key events I want to highlight about this pivotal year as the homefront was an important part of the Vietnam War.

On April 4, 1968, MLK was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel. James Earl Ray killed him with a sniper shot to the neck. Here is a link of Walter Cronkite announcing MLK's death as the news broke:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmOBbxgqKvo>

The death of the most active non-violent activist in the movement produced riots in major cities throughout the country, restrengthened racial barriers, and used the fear of black urban crime to gain support for the Republicans in the 1968 election.



Speaking of elections, JFK's little brother, Robert Kennedy (RFK), was campaigning in the summer of 1968 for the Democratic nomination for the general election in November. It looked as if he would secure the nomination when he won the California primary in June. As he was giving his victory speech at the Ambassador Hotel in LA, he was shot and killed by Sirhan Sirhan, a Palestinian who opposed RFK's stance on supporting Israel.

RFK's assassination

arguably handed the election to Nixon and the Republicans in November and turned American politics more conservative. And this was the first incident of political violence in the US resulting from the Palestinian-Israeli dispute.



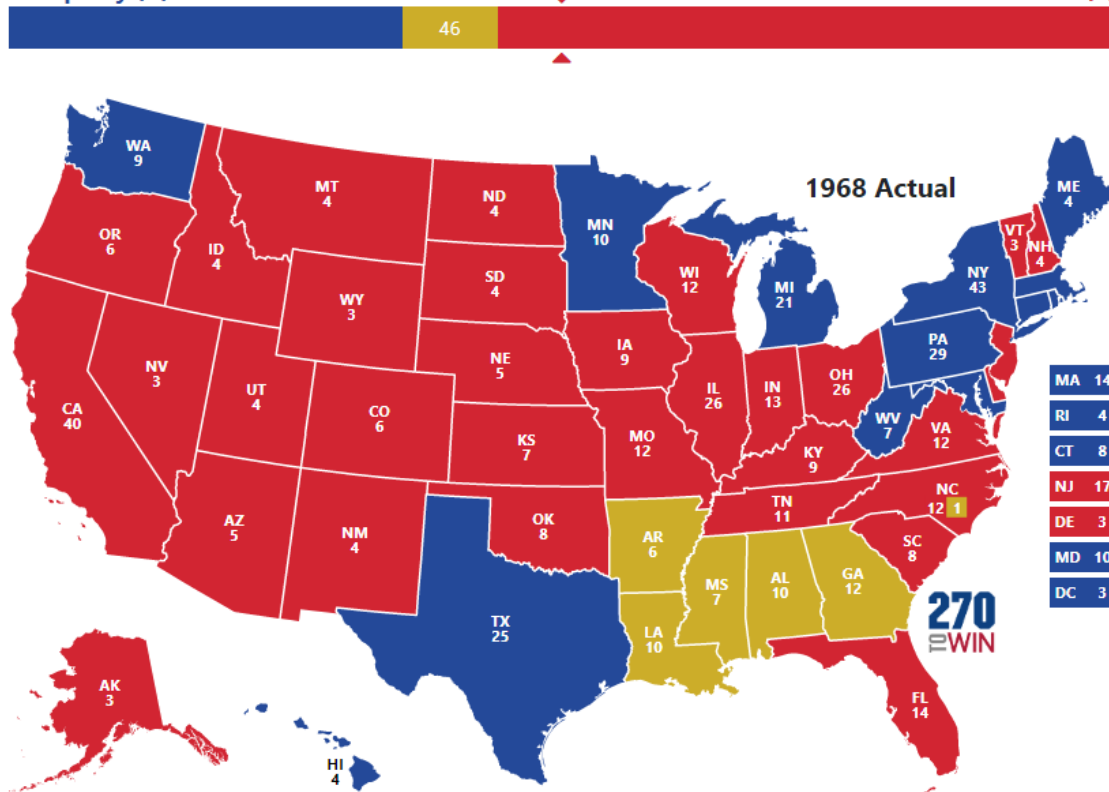
The Election of 1968 was an important election in US history as it shifted US politics back to the conservative side with the election of Richard Nixon. Nixon appealed to the "Silent Majority" in this election – which were the Americans who weren't necessarily active in the anti-war movement who felt that their voices were not heard or drowned out by the anti-war movement. Other issues that affected this election were political assassinations, race riots, and the violence at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. See the electoral map below – this is also when the electorate began to shift. Prior to the 1960s, the Southern states tended to vote Democrats while the North tended to vote Republican. During the Civil Rights era, this began to shift.



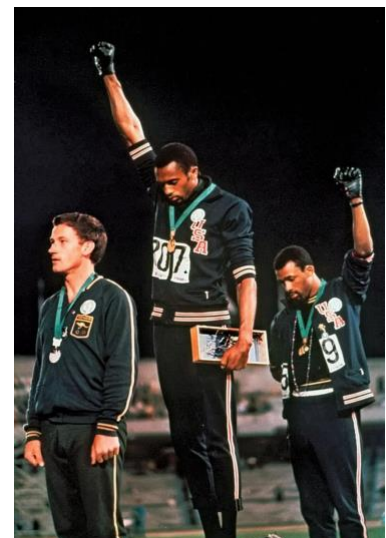
VIETNAM WAR DIGITAL HISTORY PROJECT

Humphrey (D) 191

301 Nixon (R)



In October, 1968 at the Summer Olympics in Mexico City, Tommie Smith and John Carlos used their place on the podium to stage a silent demonstration protesting ongoing racial discrimination in the US. They raised their fists during the National Anthem, and this silent protest led to an outcry against their actions and the International Olympic Committee spoke out against their actions. Some felt that their actions damaged the Olympic spirit by bringing politics into the games. As they walked away from the ceremony they were booed by the crowd. But I think this is an important moment for the Civil Rights Movement as these athletes had the world stage for a moment and were successful in creating a dialogue around the racial discrimination in the US.





In November, 1968 the TV show “Star Trek” aired the first interracial kiss in US TV history – imagine the heads that exploded when that aired! The Star Trek episode was “Plato’s Stepchildren” and James Kirk kissed Uhura – and the NBC censors insisted on filming an alternate version without the interracial kiss. William Shatner reportedly ruined any alternative take to force the network to air the kiss. [Click here for this groundbreaking moment in TV history.](#)

1968 ended on a positive note for the country with the Apollo mission on Christmas Eve. This mission was the first manned spacecraft to orbit the moon and included astronauts Jim Lovell, Bill Anders, and Frank Borman. This was the first time the lunar surface was broadcasted on live TV and the first manned mission to the far side of the moon. This mission also produced the famous “Earthrise” image. Andrew Chaikin authored a book about the Apollo Program entitled “A Man on the Moon.” In the book, Chaikin wrote about how the astronauts received a large amount of telegrams congratulating them on their mission but the one that stuck out from all others said “You Saved 1968.”





Module 3 Summary

- The Reconstruction Amendments had a major impact on civil rights in America by abolishing slavery, extending citizenship, and expanding suffrage to black men.
- Southern states found ways to subvert these new rights, in an era referred to as Jim Crow.
- The Civil Rights Movement kicked off with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the murder of Emmett Till.
- The Vietnam War impacted the Civil Rights Movement as the draft favored people of color and lower socioeconomic status.
- The Anti-War Movement loudly protested the war and showed that the American public had little patience for a long war.
- The year 1968 had many historical events that impacted the country for years to come.

What's Next?

- Complete the Module 3 Primary Source Analysis Activity.
- Complete the Module 3 Knowledge Check.

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