

1960s – THE FALL OF LIBERAL, ACTIVIST GOVERNMENT

WHY THE SUDDEN “FALL” OF LIBERALISM?

In short, the limited success of the War on Poverty (followed by urban unrest in black neighborhoods) and the escalation of the Vietnam War turned many voters away from liberalism and eroded people’s confidence in a “promising time.” They became more suspicious of government officials making promises and, more importantly, they began to wonder if government itself could really solve the difficult problems of poverty, racism, and threats to American interests around the world. Americans were no longer as sure that government could be counted on to “always or almost always” do the right thing.

OVERPROMISING: “GUNS AND BUTTER”

Johnson’s willingness to “over-promise” began to undermine his popularity. He claimed the US could afford to escalate the war in Vietnam (which would cost a significant amount of money) AND also spend significant amounts of money on anti-poverty programs, job training programs, enforcement of civil rights laws, federal aid to public schools, food stamps, public housing assistance, and any number of other things. He was promising everything to everyone. Some critics came to call this approach “guns and butter” – we can win the war in Vietnam (guns) AND the war on poverty at home (butter).

This level of spending, however, was not sustainable.

URBAN UNREST AND INCREASING RACIAL TENSIONS

The Johnson administration’s domestic policies also sparked divisions within the country along racial lines.

After focusing so intently on Civil Rights legislation and on improving living conditions for blacks through his anti-poverty programs, Johnson expected blacks to be grateful. Instead, beginning in 1965 in Watts, a series of riots broke out in American northern and western cities.

The reaction to and assessment of these riots depended largely on one’s point of view (and, to be sure, one’s race). Blacks saw the riots as an explosion of frustration on the part of inner-city residents who did not have access to decent jobs, education, or housing and who were the victims of police brutality. Segregation may have been illegal, but blacks still lived in segregated ghettos with poor schools, marginal public services, violent streets, little access to good paying jobs, and terrible housing. They had seen little improvement in their daily lives despite the millions that had been spent on the War on Poverty and the passage of civil rights legislation.

On the other hand, many whites who had originally supported Kennedy and Johnson’s liberal policies reacted angrily to the riots and questioned why blacks would resort to

violence and destroy property in their own neighborhoods – particularly when it seemed the government was doing so much to help them. In part, white reaction showed their own unfamiliarity with conditions in the ghettos, but it also revealed their frustration and worry that their own status was beginning to decline.

To them, Johnson's programs seemed to focus on helping blacks at the expense of poor and working-class whites. The support these social programs received from wealthy white liberals also kindled resentment among poor and working-class whites. In this sense, white resentment (or backlash) revealed both racial and class tensions. These whites would soon be referred to as the "Silent Majority" (as opposed to the "noisy minority" that was rioting in the streets or protesting the Vietnam War.)

The silent majority preferred "law and order" to rioting and disorder. Supporting "law and order," of course, was less controversial than opposing civil rights. Americans who might have been reluctant to say they opposed civil rights legislation were more comfortable insisting that all they were asking is that the law be followed and that people should not resort to violence or rioting to get their own way.

THE QUAGMIRE OF VIETNAM

Johnson's handling of the war troubled voters and sharply divided public opinion. Most Americans believed he should either pull out of Vietnam altogether or should take steps to win the war immediately (perhaps even using nuclear weapons to do so). Johnson's approach – a middle course in which neither U.S. victory nor North Vietnamese defeat seemed anywhere near in sight – had virtually no support by mid-1968.

Johnson's advisors acknowledged the war was going badly, but insisted it was "impossible" to pull out of Vietnam. This kind of advice was of little help to the President since it offered no solutions. In the end, Johnson tried to avoid talking about Vietnam or to exaggerate American progress in the war.

The Tet Offensive in January 1968, in particular, demonstrated the degree to which the administration had been deceiving the public about the situation in Vietnam. In late 1967, Johnson had insisted the war was nearly over – there was a "light at the end of the tunnel." Then, in January 1968, the Tet Offensive took place. This was a surprise attack on American positions throughout South Vietnam undertaken by the North Vietnamese Army and anti-American Vietnamese in the South (known as the Viet Cong).

In time, the American troops erased the Vietnamese gains, and, in fact, destroyed what was left of the Viet Cong. In this sense, it ultimately proved a military victory for the US, but it did not bring the war any closer to a close. More importantly, it made it clear that despite consistent victories in battle, the US could not achieve a decisive victory.

Walter Cronkite, the CBS news anchor and one of the most trusted figures in the nation, declared that the US should now consider withdrawing from Vietnam. Johnson

understood that if he lost the support of Cronkite, he had lost the support of middle America. Ultimately, the Johnson presidency was destroyed by the quagmire of Vietnam.

ANTI-WAR VS ANTI-PROTESTERS

White, working-class voters 55 years of age and older whose sons were serving in Vietnam opposed the war (even more than young people 18-29, who, in the aggregate, expressed strong support for the war). However, they did not approve of the loud minority of anti-war protesters. They viewed the protestors, fairly or not, as privileged, over-educated, spoiled, and un-American – despite agreeing with them that the Vietnam war was ill-advised. College educated protesters were able to avoid the draft, however the sons of the working class ended up doing the fighting and dying in Vietnam. This created sharp divisions within the nation based on class.

Richard Nixon, running for president again in 1968, skillfully exploited the widening divisions in the country as a way of securing votes. Unlike the “promising time” atmosphere that had characterized the election of 1960, this election showed how polarized the nation had become and the extent to which Americans were becoming disillusioned with what they saw as the “over promising” of Liberalism.

Nixon won the election of 1968, though just barely. Four years later, however, he won in a landslide. Within eight years, the electoral map had switched from nearly all blue to nearly all red. Liberalism’s “hour” was over and the divisions in the country – along both racial and class lines – were deeper than ever.