1968 – “The Hard Year”

[You should review these notes alongside the Powerpoint presentation, posted on the syllabus.]

A Promising Time No More…

When Lyndon B. Johnson won re-election in 1964 in one of the greatest landslides in American history, it appeared that Johnson’s brand of liberalism and activist government had a bright (and long) future to come.

By the end of 1965, the Civil Rights legislation first proposed by John F. Kennedy had become law as had the Kennedy tax cut. Kennedy era proposals calling for public aid to education and the legislation that was to constitute the core of Johnson’s “War on Poverty” had already passed or were winding their way through Congress and would soon be law. Few Americans foresaw the troubled days and years ahead for Johnson and American liberalism.

The Vietnam Quagmire

In large part, the decline of Kennedy-Johnson liberalism was due to the Vietnam War.

Johnson had ordered a significant escalation of American involvement shortly after the 1964 election. Massive bombing of the North began with Operation Rolling Thunder. (By the time the war was over, the Americans had dropped more tonnage of bombs on North Vietnam that it had in all of World War II.) The number of ground troops headed to Vietnam also increased substantially between 1965 and 1968 (when the number hit a peak – see Powerpoint slide) and yet there would be little evidence that the increased American military presence was doing anything to bring the South Vietnamese closer to victory over the North. In fact, to frustrated Americans, the South’s army seemed satisfied letting the U.S. take up most of the responsibility for fighting the North. Some even questioned the extent to which the South Vietnamese people supported their government and its American ally.

Still, the majority of Americans continued to support the war; what they were beginning to question was Johnson’s handling of it. Though the anti-war movement was increasing in numbers from 1965-1967, it still represented a small minority, even though it was beginning to get significant media coverage. Meanwhile, the majority of Americans, as late as November 1967, supported a “tougher” policy in Vietnam than Johnson was pursuing. The prevailing attitude, it seemed, was "it was an error for us to have gotten involved in Vietnam in the first place. But now that we're there, let's win – or get out."
Well aware of public opinion, at the end of 1967, the Johnson Administration launched a media blitz (called a “Success Initiative”) to paint as optimistic an account of the war as it could. Numerous officials insisted that victory (and therefore U. S. withdrawal) was “within sight” (though, significantly, no explicit definition of what would constitute “victory” was ever given.) Supposedly, there was “a light at the end of the tunnel.” The U. S. would win “soon” and finally extract its soldiers from the jungles of Vietnam. In many ways, such assurances resembled the rhetoric associated with the “promising time” of the early 1960s.

When Johnson convened a meeting of several highly-regarded foreign policy experts (the “wise men” – see Powerpoint slide) to solicit advice, the majority urged him to “talk up” the war and to continue conveying an optimistic message to the public. Even though they did admit “the war is not going well,” they insisted that “pulling out is impossible.”

Johnson agreed. He had no intention of being the “first American president to lose a war.” Curiously, Johnson himself admitted privately that he saw no way of winning the war. That said, he could not imagine losing it. The bombing would continue, but success would prove elusive. And the public, who wanted a quick end to the war (and preferably a victorious one) grew increasingly impatient and frustrated.

**Tet Offensive and the “Credibility Gap”**

Tet, the Vietnamese New Year, promised to offer the Americans a respite from fighting. The U. S. assumed the Vietnamese would not launch any major military operations during the traditional holiday celebrations.

Moreover, if the statements coming from the Johnson administration were to be believed, the North Vietnamese (and their Southern allies, the Viet Cong) were not capable of launching any such major attack. The South was secure; the capital, Saigon, was well-protected; and the American Embassy was impregnable.

In the wake of the Tet Offensive (launched on January 31, 1968), all of these assumptions proved to be nonsense. Coordinated attacks occurred throughout the South in more than 150 locations, and were especially violent in and around Saigon. The Americans and South Vietnamese had been caught entirely by surprise and, during the early days, it appeared the enemy had won a significant victory. That such a widespread, coordinated attack had even occurred revealed that the Johnson administration’s assessment of the situation on the ground in Vietnam had been dead wrong, or, even worse, a lie.

The reaction in the U. S. was devastating to the Johnson administration. Many Americans who had previously supported the President and his policies (albeit tepidly) now seemed to turn against him. This did not mean that the majority favored withdrawal from Vietnam (the so-called “dove” position). Again, polls showed in the weeks after Tet that 61 percent of Americans declared themselves “hawks” (in support of a *tougher* stand in Vietnam) while only 23 percent identified as “doves.” What mattered was that
public confidence in Johnson’s ability to bring the war to a quick and successful close was evaporating. Many viewed his optimistic rhetoric with contempt. Herblock, the political cartoonist for the *Washington Post*, ridiculed Johnson and his (apparently false) claims that the war was going well. (See Herblock cartoons – Powerpoint slides).

In addition, the video and photographs coming out of Vietnam showed unspeakable brutality, not on the part of the Communists, but on the part of the South Vietnamese Army. One South Vietnamese officer murdered a Viet Cong soldier in cold blood as camera men recorded the act (See Powerpoint slide). Such violence made many Americans question why the U. S. was supporting such people. Both “hawks” and “doves” expressed little confidence in the South Vietnamese military.

It also appeared that many South Vietnamese (to say nothing of the North Vietnamese) were willing to give their lives to the cause of ejecting the Americans from their country. Buddhist monks, for example, continued to set themselves on fire as a protest against the South Vietnamese government and its American ally. This suggested to doves that any kind of victory for the Americans was impossible. The very people we were defending wanted the U. S. to leave. To hawks, it meant that only a stepped-up U.S. military effort would bring the war to a close. Johnson, however, opposed both withdrawal and any significant escalation – and thereby pleased no one.

The relentless American bombing was also destroying villages and leaving Vietnamese civilians homeless and hopeless. Convinced such bombing of rural areas was the only way to “flush out” the enemy’s guerilla fighters, American officials declared somewhat awkwardly that they “had to destroy the village to save it” from the Communists. Such logic met with skepticism on the home front.

For the first time, the mainstream media began to criticize sharply the Johnson policies. *Life* Magazine’s critical account of the Tet Offensive was seen by hundreds of thousands of Americans. Walter Cronkite -- anchor of the CBS Evening News, and one of the most trusted men in America -- broke away from his long held “just the facts” approach to convey directly to the American people his own skepticism about the war. Though he did not call for an immediate withdrawal of American forces, Cronkite made it clear that the U. S. had to re-evaluate its position. The war’s likely outcome, he believed, was a stalemate. Given that victory seemed unlikely, Cronkite concluded, the process of de-escalation should begin.

In the weeks after the initial Tet Offensive, American troops once again proved superior to their North Vietnamese and Viet Cong counterparts. In fact, throughout the war the Americans never lost a conventional, set-piece battle. In this case, they drove the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong out of the positions to which they had initially advanced. The Viet Cong in particular suffered terrible losses and, for all intents and purposes, was destroyed as a viable military force. The North Vietnamese were far from defeated, however. Though they retreated, they would survive to fight another day.
These American victories on the battlefield, however, did little to influence public opinion at home. Having over-promised, Johnson bore the wrath of an angry population that believed (with some just cause) that it had been deceived. The “rosy scenario” that the administration had painted and the reality on the ground seemed incompatible. One now frequently heard the phrase “Credibility Gap” – an indication that the public no longer trusted Johnson and, indeed, thought he and his spokesmen had been lying all along. When administration officials haplessly called attention to the post-Tet U.S. tactical victories, few – doves or hawks – were willing to listen. As Johnson himself conceded, “If I’ve lost Cronkite, I’ve lost Middle America.”

The Fall of Lyndon Johnson

Johnson was nearly destroyed by the fall out from the Tet Offensive. Never convinced that fighting in Vietnam was a good idea, he had escalated the war thinking he was continuing the Kennedy policy and out of fear that if he didn’t “stay the course,” he would be remembered as the first President to lose a war.

Johnson was an outsized Texan with an outsized ego. He had risen to power thanks to his uncanny ability to “persuade” fellow politicians to take his side and to support him with their votes in Congress. When gentle persuasion failed, Johnson was not above arm-twisting and bullying. The “Johnson treatment” was notorious in Washington and few politicians ever wished to be on the receiving end. (See Powerpoint slide)

Still, Johnson and his methods had proved remarkably successful over the years – not least after Kennedy’s assassination when Johnson skillfully rammmed through Kennedy’s major legislative proposals during the brief window of time when the country was still in shock and longed to show its devotion to the dead President’s memory.

Johnson’s demonstrated ability to win over his fellow politicians one by one never extended to an ability to win over his fellow Americans. He lacked Kennedy’s charisma. If Kennedy was cool, calm, and collected, Johnson was loud, coarse, and mercurial. If Kennedy’s humor was witty and ironic, Johnson’s was earthy and often vulgar. His southern twang offended snobbish New York and Boston intellectuals, and yet his fellow southerners never fully embraced him – some considering him a “traitor” due to his support for Civil Rights. Unlike Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy before him and Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton after him, Johnson never “connected” personally with the American people. A compelling figure in person, he was terrible on television (in sharp contrast to Kennedy). Moreover, he was well aware of this shortcoming and insecure (and resentful) because of it. He bitterly lamented that he had done far more for the people who “loved” Kennedy than had Kennedy himself, but that they never recognized his achievements and never “loved” him as they had Kennedy. He was right on both counts, but in 1968 it hardly mattered.

The Vietnam War, it appeared, would destroy the Johnson presidency unless Johnson himself could take steps to turn around the situation and reassure the public that he was trustworthy. Ironically, the “great persuader” who had converted countless Senators and
Congressmen to his side over the years seemed completely unable to persuade the country to “stay the course” with him. In the early months of 1968, it appeared to one cartoonist that the “scar” of Vietnam might well do Johnson in. (See Powerpoint slide)

Can the Center hold?

More importantly, not only the continued viability of the Johnson administration was at stake. Many Americans wondered if the U. S. political system – represented by the broad political “center” that had swept Johnson back to the White House in 1964 – would survive the crisis of Vietnam. Both the right and the left were in full attack mode. The right (“hawks”) attacked Johnson’s inability to achieve a swift and decisive victory in the war (even if, some argued, it meant using nuclear weapons on the Vietnamese). The left (“doves”) attacked Johnson as a “Cold War liberal” and insisted that the U. S. misadventure in Vietnam was not a tragic mistake but the inevitable result of a capitalist system that encouraged war and imperialism. Some on the left even longed for a North Vietnamese victory. This left Johnson and the liberals besieged in “middle of the road,” where, Johnson often said, one found “only yellow lines and dead armadillos.” Many feared (and some hoped) the “center” was about to collapse and that the country would be swept up into a tide of extremist (or “revolutionary”) violence.

But there were other voices at the “Center” of American politics, and by February of 1968, they were beginning to articulate alternatives to Johnson’s war policies.

Challenges to Johnson – Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy

Eugene McCarthy, Democratic Senator from Minnesota, was a strange choice to lead an antiwar crusade, let alone a viable campaign for the presidency against a sitting president in his own party.

McCarthy was not a glad-handing extrovert like most politicians. As a young man, had spent a year cloistered in a monastery contemplating whether he wished to pursue the life of a monk (he asked his fiancée to wait for him, just in case he reconsidered – he did, and she waited.) Even worse, McCarthy, a former college professor, had a habit of using ten-dollar words to make a ten-cent point. He loved poetry, not politics, and often quoted obscure literary figures, to the bewilderment of his semi-literate American audiences. Some supporters grumbled that McCarthy seemed to go out of his way to give dull speeches. He also seemed to lack the ambition and over-confidence typical of presidential candidates. Asked if he thought he’d make a good President, McCarthy answered that hoped he would be “satisfactory.”

Regardless of his quirks, McCarthy did offer a clear alternative to Johnson. He opposed the President’s conduct of the war and became the darling of the college anti-war protesters. They shaved their beards (going “clean for Gene”) and descended on New Hampshire to campaign for their champion and the anti-war cause.
To everyone’s surprise (including McCarthy’s), he nearly defeated Johnson in the New Hampshire primary. If a candidate as unlikely (and strange) as McCarthy could make such a showing, it was clear that Johnson was not as invincible as the conventional wisdom had previously assumed.

This point was not lost on another anti-war Democrat, Robert Kennedy, the younger brother of the slain President. Originally Kennedy had planned to run in 1972 (assuming Johnson would win re-election in 1968), but the political winds had shifted and young Bobby saw an opening.

Kennedy had the advantage of his last name and his family’s considerable wealth, but he had to overcome a well-earned reputation for ruthlessness and unrestrained ambition. When he announced his candidacy, McCarthy supporters accused him of cynical opportunism. Their man, they argued, had taken the risk in challenging Johnson. Now that it appeared Johnson was vulnerable, Kennedy was swooping in to grab the nomination when it by all rights belonged to McCarthy. Moreover, McCarthy supporters saw Kennedy’s entry into the race not as evidence of his genuine commitment to the anti-war cause but rather a personal crusade to destroy the career of Lyndon Johnson, who, as nearly everyone knew, Kennedy hated. (See Powerpoint slides)

In any event, Kennedy’s decision to throw his hat into the ring created the odd situation in which not only was the Democratic party split, but the anti-war wing of the Democratic party was split. This seemed to insure that Johnson, though vulnerable, would likely emerge the victor.

**Johnson Bows Out**

By March 1968, Johnson had once again convened the “Wise Men.” This time, they were far less optimistic and advised him to pursue negotiations and scale down the bombing as an incentive to bring the North Vietnamese to the table. If the American people saw that Johnson had taken decisive steps toward ending the war, the Wise Men advised him, he would be in good shape as he began his campaign for re-election.

Johnson took their advice and appeared on national television on the night of March 31st. He announced a partial bombing halt and declared that the U.S. would soon take steps to de-escalate the war. To nearly everyone’s surprise, however, he dramatically ended the address by announcing that “I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your president.”

This astonishing news led many to conclude that Johnson was admitting defeat – that the war had ruined him. Moreover, it appeared that the defeat was not Johnson’s alone. With his withdrawal from the race, it seemed, the “center” had dropped out of American politics. The great consensus builder who had brought the country together behind his own brand of liberal, activist government had failed – indeed he had given up. By extension, the system he embodied appeared to be collapsing. To the question, “Can the Center hold?” many Americans feared (or hoped) the answer was “No.”
The Unraveling of America – King and Kennedy Assassinated

Though some radicals on the left dreamed of “revolution” in the wake of Johnson’s announcement, most Americans remained confident in the system, though their confidence was certainly much diminished from the heights it had reached during the “promising time” of the early 1960s.

A great blow to this confidence occurred four days after Johnson withdrew from the campaign. In Memphis, the civil rights leader Martin Luther King was murdered by James Earl Ray, a white segregationist. King had represented the segment of the Movement that backed non-violence and interracial cooperation. Though King was a vocal critic of the Vietnam war and far more radical than he was later to be portrayed, many at the center of American politics – black and white – held him in high regard and hoped he would keep the Movement from descending into violence and factionalism.

As if to confirm their anxieties, on the night of his assassination riots broke out in cities around the nation. Black neighborhoods erupted in flames as police scrambled to contain the violence. Fears of the outbreak of a “race war” circulated wildly (fueled in some cases by white segregationists and black nationalists who had longed for a violent turn in black-white relations). Many observers concluded that American society was “sick” and perhaps beyond recovery.

On the night of King’s death, however, Robert Kennedy delivered a speech in Indianapolis, Indiana that suggested an alternative to division and violence. (See audio link in Powerpoint slide) Addressing a gathering consisting largely of African Americans who had not yet heard the news about King, Kennedy told them of his death and urged them not to react with anger and hatred but to redouble their efforts to bring the country together by emphasizing the values that all Americans shared. Kennedy won over the crowd, and, unlike in so many other cities, that night there were no riots in Indianapolis.

The speech proved a turning point in Kennedy’s campaign. To many African Americans, he had become the “last hope” now that King had died. To the antiwar movement, he offered an alternative to the more radical voices whose virulent attacks on the United States and its system of government seemed overwrought and unpatriotic. To many working class white Americans as well, he offered an alternative to frustration and hatred. He opposed the war (as many of them did) but he was not a “radical.” Rather, he was a reminder of the “promising time” over which his brother had presided only eight years before. Somehow, Kennedy seemed to be able to bring together a multi-racial, multi-class coalition at a time of deep national division. He did so, his supporters believed, by appealing to the “better angels” of the American people.

Indeed, the people seemed desperate for such a unifying figure – if only to reassure them that the American system remained viable. Along the campaign trail, Kennedy met huge, enthusiastic crowds. People reached out to touch him as if he were a faith healer. The level of emotion at Kennedy rallies seemed almost cult-like. Kennedy himself took
on superhero status. His insistence on traveling to the poorest areas – inner city ghettos, southern rural districts, the fields of California’s central valley – put to rest the claims of his critics that he was simply another cynical politician. Even many of the McCarthy supporters backed away from their earlier criticisms. (See Powerpoint slides)

Kennedy’s campaigning brought electoral success. He ran off a string of primary victories, culminating in his momentous victory in the California primary. Though Kennedy himself knew – even if his enraptured supporters did not – that the road to the presidential nomination would still be a rough one, the victory in California kept the campaign alive. He hoped the momentum would carry on to the Democratic convention in Chicago where his upstart movement would square off against the Democratic establishment.

It was not to be. At the conclusion of his victory speech, the Kennedy party unexpectedly departed the stage and, rather than moving into the crowd to shake hands with his supporters as had been planned, the candidate was diverted backstage into the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel. Sirhan Sirhan, a Palestinian nationalist who resented Kennedy’s support for Israel, was waiting for him. He shot the Senator three times, mortally wounding him.

Only two months after King’s shocking assassination, Kennedy’s tragic death again raised the issue of whether American society could hold together. Many feared the only man capable of uniting the nation was now gone.

**Hubert Humphrey**

Hubert H. Humphrey, Lyndon Johnson’s vice-president, emerged in the wake of Kennedy’s death as the likely presidential nominee of the Democratic party. McCarthy remained in the race, though there seemed little chance he would be able to pull together enough delegates at the national convention in Chicago to overcome Humphrey’s support which was based in the party “establishment” – older, whiter, and more pro-war than the average Democratic voter.

Johnson kept his vice-president on a tight leash. He forbade him from directly criticizing the administration and insisted that Humphrey “toe the line” on the war. Humphrey’s position on the war could not deviate one iota from the administration’s position, Johnson declared, or, he intimated, he himself might re-enter the race and dash Humphrey’s long held hope of winning the presidency. Humphrey remained loyal to Johnson in his public statements, however, he acknowledged privately that he had moved closer to the Kennedy-McCarthy position on the war.

**The Democratic Convention in Chicago**

The Democratic campaign came to a head at the National Convention in Chicago. Though there seemed little doubt that Humphrey, perhaps by default, would win the nomination, many anti-war activists in the party still hoped to put the Democrats on
record as supporting the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam. They would fail in their attempt to do so. The “establishment” Democrats voted down the anti-war resolution in a close vote that initially angered but ultimately demoralized the anti-war minority.

Meanwhile, outside the convention hall, various anti-war groups had converged on Chicago to express their own opposition to the war and, in some cases, their contempt for the Democratic party and the American political system. Led by a vocal minority that threatened, among other things, to lace the Chicago water supply with LSD, the protestors enraged Chicago mayor Richard M. Daley who vowed to keep “law and order” by whatever means necessary.

When the protestors refused to disperse, Daley ordered the police to force their dispersal. What followed, most observers later concluded, was a police riot. Angry police officers, who believed with some justification that they had been mistreated by the young “hippies,” aggressively attacked the protestors with tear gas and billy clubs. For many policemen, whose sons were fighting and dying in Vietnam, the protestors seemed pampered and privileged, kept out of the fighting by college deferments. They vented their rage on them indiscriminately. The protestors, well aware of the media presence and convinced that the people would be on their side, chanted “The whole world is watching!”

As Humphrey sat in his hotel room celebrating his nomination, tear gas wafted through the ventilation system, cutting short the party. Indeed, for the Democrats, it did seem as if the party was over. Not only was there deep division on the convention floor, the conflict between protestors and police outside seemed to embody the failure of the liberal consensus that had flourished only five years before.

When the dust settled, anti-war activists were shocked to find that polls showed the majority of Americans supported the Chicago police, not the protestors. It was the first clear sign that a backlash to the antiwar movement and the liberal wing of the Democratic party was taking shape.

George Wallace and the Politics of Division

One form the incipient backlash took was the third party candidacy of George Wallace. The Alabama governor had risen to national fame (or infamy), when he had stood at the “school house door” refusing to let the National Guard enforce racial integration at the University of Alabama. The gesture was purely symbolic – the University integrated in accordance with the law – but Wallace was more concerned with optics than substance. He had stood his ground, and he reveled in the media coverage of the event. Wallace knew such images touched a nerve not only with white southerners, but with many white northerners who, though not especially concerned about segregation in the South, were furious at “liberal elites” who seemed to be threatening their way of life by having government intrude on what they considered private or personal matters. For good measure, Wallace chose as his running mate General Curtis LeMay, whose position on
the war was to “bomb the North Vietnamese back to the stone age.” Such rhetoric was a caricature of the broader public sentiment that supported a “quick end” to the war, but with a certain constituency, it resonated.

Ironically, quite a few white Kennedy voters would end up voting for Wallace in November. At first, it would seem the progressive Kennedy and the reactionary Wallace had little in common, but in fact both demonstrated a genuine respect for the concerns of white, working class voters. Wallace appealed to their anger and frustration while Kennedy appealed to their sense of hope and optimism. Both appealed to their patriotism. Indeed, in the general election, Wallace tried to emphasize patriotic themes and jettisoned much of the overt racism that had previously won him the white vote in Alabama. He suggested that white working class America was under siege and had to summon the courage to stand up for “true” American values. It was a vague appeal, and undoubtedly drew in many white racists, but Wallace hoped that in a closely contested election neither major party candidate would garner a majority and that he would gain a broad enough base of support to pull out a victory when the House of Representatives had to decide the winner. There was little merit to such a theory, but Wallace undoubtedly drew votes away from Humphrey.

**Richard Nixon – Wallace-lite**

The Republican nominee, Richard Nixon, handily won the support of his party and headed into the general election confident of victory.

Nixon’s strategy was similar to Wallace’s in that he sought to exploit the divisions within American society, though he did so without relying on overt appeals to white racism. He believed he could cobble together a majority of “average Americans” that resented the turmoil stirred up by the civil rights and antiwar movements (turmoil and violence embodied at the Democratic convention in Chicago). He appealed to the “non-shouters, the non-protestors, the law abiding citizens” who longed for a return of “law and order” (a phrase he never precisely defined). On the war, Nixon led voters to believe he had a “secret plan” to end hostilities (though he himself never used that exact phrase). For his supporters, this was enough.

Many other Americans, though not especially enamored of Nixon (or Humphrey or Wallace) were troubled and exhausted by the events of the “hard year” of 1968 and were desperate for a return to stability. Ultimately, enough of them found Nixon’s message, if not the candidate himself, appealing. If nothing else, he conjured memories of the more placid times of the Eisenhower administration – before the upheaval of the 1960s had disrupted the country and complicated their own lives.

Lacking a clear positive message – “Nixon’s the One” was the best the campaign could do for a defining slogan – and never particularly popular with voters, Nixon saw his lead over Humphrey diminish as the campaign continued. When Humphrey finally announced in the last weeks that he supported a negotiated settlement to the war in
Vietnam that would bring home the American troops, it seemed the race had tightened to the point where it was “too close to call.” In the end, though, Nixon managed to eke out a victory. Despite the closeness of the election, Nixon portrayed his triumph as a decisive rejection of the Democratic party and its brand of activist liberalism.

To many, it appeared that a new era in American politics – a more conservative era – was beginning. To an extent, this was true, but the issues raised during the 1960s – as well as the Vietnam war – were not going away any time soon. It would fall to Nixon to grapple with them as the tumultuous decade came to a close.