

America in the Sixties

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In 1977 the American scholar Morris Dickstein wrote:

[t]he sixties are over but they remain the watershed of our recent cultural history; they continue to affect the ambiance of our lives in innumerable ways.⁽¹⁾

The years since this statement have simply served to confirm Dickstein's statement, and perhaps have broadened it beyond mere cultural history. Bill Clinton, first Baby Boomer President, has come and gone while a generation of Boomer politicians has fought over the legacy of one of the most tumultuous decades in American history. Clinton himself has commented on this debate, noting that,

[i]f you look back on the 60s and on balance, you think there was more good than harm, then you're probably a Democrat. If you think there was more harm than good, you're probably a Republican.⁽²⁾

This partisan split has ranged over issues from the puerile (did Clinton inhale marijuana smoke during his youth?) to the impassioned (arguments over Medicare and Medicaid that continue to rumble in the wake of President Obama's healthcare reforms). Scurrilous rumours concerning Senator John Kerry's Vietnam War record dominated the 2004 Presidential election and in August 2010 we were treated to the bizarre sight of rightwing polemicist Glenn Beck attempting to capture the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in a

'Restoring Honor' rally on the Washington Mall.

Historians have thankfully been somewhat less frenzied in their reassessments of the 1960s. The political history of the decade has been reshaped as historians have dug underneath the headline tales of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations to examine the growth of a new conservative political movement that has since dominated American politics. Our understanding of African American protest has been enriched by numerous historians placing the 1960s civil rights movement in a variety of different geographical, chronological and interpretative frameworks. We have also been deluged with studies that offer new approaches to sex, gender, race, popular culture, suburbanization, war and many other aspects of the decade's history. Thankfully, single-volume surveys of the decade appear at regular intervals to offer syntheses and summaries of this sprawling history. Of these texts, Allen J. Matusow's *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (3) and Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin's *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (4) are worthy of particular attention. The former is a devastating portrait of the demise of liberalism that also includes a fine appreciation of the multifaceted nature of the counterculture. It retains its power and authority even 17 years after its publication. The latter has rapidly become accepted as a classic study of the decade's struggles, thanks in part to its nuanced understanding of the history and a very fine thematic approach that encompasses a vast array of topics and issues.

John Robert Greene, then, has a lot to live up to if he is to make an impression in a crowded field. As part of Syracuse University Press's 'America in the Twentieth Century' series (of which Greene is the Series Editor), *America in the Sixties* does not set out to transform our understanding of the 1960s through a radical interpretative rethink but instead introduces readers to key issues, controversies and developments. Designed as a teaching text for undergraduates, the book is an accessible and breezy read. Greene's structure is superficially reminiscent of Isserman and Kazin's. Each chapter focuses on a particular historical theme within a broader chronological narrative: three focus on presidential politics, two retell the story of the civil rights movement, and one concentrates on New Left politics, the counterculture, the Vietnam War, and the rise of Richard Nixon. Unfortunately, a hoary old cliché instantly springs to mind when examining the book. An egregious punctuation error dominates the book's cover, one that countless students will have been exhorted to avoid.

Greene's great strength is in offering a brief précis of the life and career of each of the four 1960s Presidents. His beautifully constructed pen portraits of Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon are marvellous examples of how to distil the essence of a political life in a few thousand words. Greene refuses to condemn Eisenhower as a 'do-nothing' President but quite rightly refrains from praising Honest Ike's businesslike and largely unsatisfactory presidency. He goes on to dismiss numerous myths that have enshrouded the life of Kennedy, painting the young President as a somewhat naive cold warrior who lacked the political experience necessary to be successful in high office. Johnson, by contrast, emerges as the insider par excellence, the great Congressional manipulator and the dominant political figure of the decade. While not refraining from criticising Johnson's errors, Greene is clearly sympathetic to the Texan's expansive brand of modern liberalism and sees the first half of his administration as the high water mark of the decade's politics. Finally, Nixon receives an even-handed appraisal which identifies him as more of a world statesman than anti-communist. Readers will find little to complain about in Greene's analysis of the Presidents. He is a balanced and fair judge, offering praise where it is due and criticism when necessary.

Outside of the presidential sphere, however, Greene is less assured. Chapters on the civil rights movement and New Left are too cursory for comfort. Greene's narrative of the civil rights movement is riddled with errors and misconceptions, including a misdating of the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision. His overall approach recapitulates the civil rights 'declension' theory, which posits that the positive message of the nonviolent, integrated movement of the early 1960s was eroded by resentful, violent black radicals. Greene's assessment of the New Left is similarly beset by interpretative problems. While he is quite right to suggest that the campuses were crucial to the development of the New Left, Greene is inattentive to conservative strands of campus political thought. In arguing that the student movement found conservatism 'repellent' (p. 98) Greene ignores the significant number of students who affiliated to conservative groups such as Young Americans for Freedom (YAF). As Rebecca Klatch and others have revealed, YAF was

arguably as important as Students for a Democratic Society (an organization that receives considerable attention) in politicising a generation of students; more so if we take into account the rightward drift of American politics in the decades since.⁽⁵⁾ Finally Greene's too-brief assessment of Second Wave feminism fails to contend with feminism's insistence that the personal was the political, and ignores the debt that many of its activists owed to political traditions and movements beyond the New Left. As is the case for his brief treatment of gay liberation, Greene's feminist movement becomes an outgrowth of other movements, rather than a movement with its own deep history.

The chapters on Vietnam and 1960s culture both open with intriguing propositions but fail to fulfil their promise. Greene presents the Vietnam War as 'the most important event in the history of the twentieth-century United States' (p. 119). Unfortunately, the bulk of the chapter offers a narrative of the war's events, leaving only five pages in which to evaluate the many domestic implications of Vietnam. Greene's approach to popular culture starts from the often-ignored observation that most historical assessments of American culture in the 1960s focus on the oppositional rather than the mainstream. The vast majority of texts treat readers to long discussions of the hippies, but very little examination of those who had crew cuts or who did not turn on, tune in and drop out. Unfortunately, the bulk of Greene's chapter falls into this very same trap, and the discussion of popular culture is somewhat disappointing. There is nothing on literature or art. The evaluation of American television is interesting and mildly provocative, but Greene's analysis of American film is shallow. *Bonnie and Clyde* (Penn, 1967), for example, is reduced to a bloodbath, with little mention of its profound effect on American cinema, society and culture. Soul music, with the exception of a page devoted to Motown, is dismissed entirely. Greene's analysis tends to seek out political meaning wherever possible, rather than taking cultural material on its own terms. Consequently, he elevates that material which he considers to have social conscience – such as Bob Dylan's protest songs, or John Lennon's 'strident[ly]' political (p. 155) lyrics – over that which does not lend itself to a simple political reading – such as Dylan's electric period or the rest of The Beatles' music. Greene is quite right to assert that '[n]o decade in American history is as defined by its culture as is the 1960s' (p. 137). So why devote only one chapter to this defining feature and why be so limiting about its significance?

The final chapter offers a curious coda to *America in the Sixties*. Alongside the neat potted biography of Nixon is an assessment of the 1968 election campaign that brings the book's flaws into sharp focus. Greene presents the 1968 campaign as one that the Democrats lost through a combination of popular resentment at the failures of the Great Society and Vietnam, the disillusionment of the youth vote and Hubert Humphrey's weaknesses. George Wallace's insurgent campaign tore 'frustrated Middle America' (p. 176) voters away from the Democratic Party while Nixon hoovered up more Middle American votes by promising to undo the mistakes of the Great Society. This is a good position from which to begin an analysis of the 1968 campaign, but it ignores a number of major issues that stem from the 1964 presidential campaign. Greene paints 1964 as a disaster for the Republicans. After all, it was the greatest landslide victory in American political history for the Democrats, who had successfully depicted Barry Goldwater as a crazed extremist. Even so, there were signs of hope for the Grand Old Party. The 1964 platform represented Republicanism at its most extreme, advocating belligerent anti-communism, free enterprise, states' rights and free religious expression while condemning moral decline and drift, obscenity and inverse discrimination. Thanks in part to a campus movement that was spearheaded by YAF, Goldwater garnered 27 million votes, a fine base which future, more moderate, campaigns could build upon. The Goldwater campaign also revealed the extent to which California conservatives had come to dominate the Republican Party. These conservatives were able to propel Ronald Reagan to victory in their state's 1966 gubernatorial election and offered vital support to Nixon in 1968, not least because Nixon was one of their own: he hailed from Yorba Linda, deep in Orange County, which was the spiritual and geographical home of the new conservative movement.⁽⁶⁾ For the Democrats, the 1964 campaign revealed the many tensions that were to undo the liberal consensus. George Wallace's primary campaign – ignored by Greene – revealed that many traditional Democratic voters were already growing resentful of liberalism's tacit approval of racial integration. Wallace uncovered a significant body of working class voters who resented change and who were becoming tired of their traditional association with the Democratic Party. Alongside the rise of the new conservatism, the Wallace insurgency points to the fundamental influence of suburbanisation on voting patterns in the 1960s and beyond, and

reveals that Johnson's triumph was built on shaky foundations. Nixon's great success in 1968 was to bring Wallace's supporters into the Republican fold, while building on the Party's new base, thus helping to create a new consensus that dominated American politics for generations. Any assessment of the 1960s simply must grapple with this major undercurrent in the decade's political history.

Greene's periodisation of the 1960s reflects Matusow's insistence that the 1968 election signalled the death knell for 1960s liberalism and hence the decade. Yet it sets *America in the Sixties* at odds with recent studies which prefer to talk of a 'long' 1960s that ends with Nixon's resignation.⁽⁷⁾ By ending the 1960s on the day of Nixon's inauguration, Greene presents the decade as a tale of Cold War liberalism's hubris and nemesis, and suggests that Nixon's presidency provided a clean break with the past. This ignores the fact that Nixon needed to work with a Democrat Congress that wished to continue pursuing a liberal agenda and overlooks his liberal policies on the environment and his almost Keynesian spending record. It overlooks Nixon's attempt to grapple with many of the same problems that had faced Johnson: inner city turmoil, African American and antiwar protest, and a spiraling federal budget. It is necessary to evaluate his response to these challenges in order to develop a thorough understanding of the decade's end and to place the 1960s in its richest context.

In its defence, *America in the Sixties* is a brief book. In less than 200 pages it grapples with a vast number of issues. A longer book might have had room to develop a more robust analysis of the decade. Even so, Greene's emphasis must be questioned. He reduces the 1960s to another decade of personalities and events – King and Kennedy, Bob Moses and Freedom Summer, Betty Friedan and *The Feminine Mystique*, Johnson and the Great Society and so on. *America in the Sixties* thus reasserts an old-fashioned approach to the 1960s, privileging political history and the lives of great men. This implicitly encourages students to view the 1960s as The Past, rather than as a living, breathing organism that has the potential to offer continued inspiration to people wishing to change the world around them. Ultimately, *America in the Sixties* may serve as a useful introductory text for first year undergraduates wanting a political history of the decade, but those who hope to investigate the broader implications of the 1960s will need to read more widely.

Notes

1. M. Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (2nd ed., Cambridge, 1997) p. 213.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Clinton quoted in 'First night: Clinton takes to the stage for the ultimate sell', *Independent*, 5 June 2004 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/first-night-clinton-takes-to-the-stage-for-the-ultimate-sell-731119.html> [2]> [accessed 10 January 2011].[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York, NY, 1984).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (2nd ed., Oxford, 2004).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. R. E. Klatch, *A Generation Divided: The New Left, the New Right and the 1960s* (Berkeley, CA, 1999).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. L. McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ, 2001) remains the best account of the rise of the new conservatism in the 1960s; for the Goldwater campaign, R. Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York, NY, 2001).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. See, for example, Isserman and Kazin, *America*; M. H. Lytle, *America's Uncivil Wars: The Sixties Era from Elvis to the Fall of Richard Nixon* (Oxford, 2006).[Back to \(7\)](#)

Other reviews:

Ralphmag

<http://www.ralphmag.org/GJ/america-60s.html> [3]

New York History

<http://www.newyorkhistoryblog.com/2010/01/new-book-america-in-sixties.html> [4]

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