

## THE SIXTIES RECONSIDERED: A FORUM

AMERICANS OFTEN DIVIDE 20TH-CENTURY U.S. HISTORY into decades. The Jazz Age, the Great Depression, and the Turbulent Sixties are bounded neatly into ten-year spans. Historians of recent America have reacted to that decadal view. The past, they contend, never conforms so nicely to such neat categories. In the lead piece to this forum on the 1960s Stephen J. Whitfield considers how important

the 1950s was for later developments in the 1960s. Yet he emphasizes that the continuity thesis has serious limitations. The 1960s witnessed a series of societal and cultural transformations that were unique to the decade. Terry H. Anderson, Alice Echols, Paul Lyons, and David Farber respond, and Whitfield concludes with his rejoinder.

### HOW THE FIFTIES BECAME THE SIXTIES

Stephen J. Whitfield

In the United States, the first decade and a half or so after the Second World War seemed to lock into place a certain set of conventions—from the broad acceptance of the New Deal to the older ideal of domesticity, from the virtue of the American way of life to its extension to grateful foreigners, from very moderate progress in race relations to moderate reverence for reverence itself. But with extremely few observers quite imagining—much less predicting—what was about to happen, suddenly the Sixties would blindside what nearly all Americans had taken for granted a decade earlier.

At first no reversal in the entire span of American history had seemed more dramatic, no transvaluation of values more obvious. With the possible exception of the shift from the Twenties to the Thirties, no contrast seemed to be more striking. But the economic disaster that had become so exigent by the very end of 1929 makes it easier to explain the transformation from the rambunctious self-indulgence typified by Warren G. Harding's pleasure in going out into the country to "bloviate" to the angst and collectivist fervor of the Great Depression. No such catastrophe can be summoned to explain how the Fifties became the Sixties. When that decade began, the old order hardly seemed to be undergoing a crisis.

On the contrary, the standard critique was dismay that so few felt the urgency of national reexamination or amelioration. The usual objection to that decade was to dismiss it as an homage to catatonia. Robert Lowell referred to "the tranquillized *Fifties*," which had begun with the 1953 inauguration of a president who had instigated an age marked by "ice, ice" everywhere. "The Republic summons Ike,/the mausoleum in her heart." Garry Wills spent most of Eisenhower's two terms in a Jesuit seminary. After emerging from the novitiate to engage in classical and historical scholarship as well as in political journalism, Wills "tended to believe people who assured me I had not missed a thing." So how could the Six-



Dwight and Mamie Eisenhower watching television at the Republican National Convention, Chicago, Illinois, July 1952. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-U9-99A-RC109].

ties have erupted? My remarks are intended to suggest how the two decades have been linked and might be better framed.

As early as 1960, a paperback anthology of primary sources aimed at undergraduate course adoption was published under the title: *The 1950's: America's "Placid" Decade*. To insert a question mark at the end of that Houghton Mifflin subtitle has been the thrust of subsequent scholarship. As early as 1977, before the whiff of tear gas on the nation's campuses had been fully exhaled, the literary historian Morris Dickstein had portrayed the late Fifties as "a fertile period, a seedbed of ideas that would burgeon and live in the more activist, less reflective climate that followed. A comparable breakup and transition could be traced in almost every sphere of American society during the same period: [even] in politics . . ."

To highlight the unobstructed path into the Sixties, the case of Allen Ginsberg is especially convenient. As early as May 1946, the Columbia undergraduate was insisting that modernity required "Orphic creativeness, juvenescent savagery, primitive abandon." These were the very attributes that the counterculture would exalt two decades later, the Dionysian qualities that not even the best minds of his generation of social scientists could foresee. If "Howl" (1955), and to a lesser extent "America" (1956), did not exist, these works would have had to be invented. The publication of *Howl and other Poems* did not exactly stir the enthusiasm of U.S. Customs officials, who seized the little City Lights' Pocket Poets Series paperback, as did the San Francisco police. Even the poet Louis Ginsberg, a leftist, objected to his son's "vehement, vaporous, vituperations of rebellion . . . Your attitude is irresponsible . . . It stinks! Love, Louis."

Yet rebellion in the Fifties also had its limits. In the year that *Howl and Other Poems* appeared, Ginsberg's closest collaborator among the Beats, Jack Kerouac, cast his ballot for Eisenhower for president (as did an already famous young Baptist preacher in Montgomery, Alabama). That both Kerouac and Martin Luther King, Jr. voted Republican suggests how warily the historian ought to push the case for the Fifties anticipating the Sixties. King was showing residual loyalty—for the last time—to the party of Lincoln. White Southerners were concurrently adhering to the party of memory—by remaining Democrats. Here is merely one instance: "I'm strictly for Stevenson," Elvis Presley announced in 1956. "I don't dig the intellectual bit, but I'm telling you, man, he knows the most."

The writer who most astutely located as well as personified the undercurrents that would erupt aboveground with such force in the Sixties was Norman Mailer. It was he who predicted that "the incredible dullness wreaked upon the American landscape in Eisenhower's eight years" of "tasteless,

sexless, odorless sanctity” would be washed away with tsunami-force, swept away by a “subterranean river of untapped, ferocious, lonely, and romantic desires, that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is the dream life of the nation.” By 1957 Mailer could already foresee “a time of violence, new hysteria, confusion and rebellion” that would soon “replace the time of conformity.” Especially prescient was his essay on “The White Negro,” which grasped how a descent into the depths of the black experience would change the sensibility of many younger whites.

Only eleven years later the Youth International Party would be founded—and the two most famous Yippies were on record as awestruck by “The White Negro.” Jerry Rubin read it three or four times (without claiming to understand it fully), and Abbie Hoffman hailed it as the American essay that “was the most influential in my life.” The Yippies flirted with faux-danger, with cap-pistol politics, forming their pseudo-party in part to expose the violence (actual or implicit) with which the consensus that had been celebrated in the Fifties was imposed.

Little more than a decade after Mailer had brooded upon the bravery of a couple of teenage toughs “beat[ing] in the brains of a [weak, 50-year-old] candy-store keeper” and thereby entering into a dangerous relationship with both the authority of the police and the sanctity of private property, a real Negro would recall how he became “an ‘outlaw’ who had deliberately ‘stepped outside of the white man’s law, which I repudiated with scorn and self-satisfaction.’” In becoming a rapist tracking “white prey,” Eldridge Cleaver seemed to step out of the pages that Mailer had written, and indeed defined his crime “as an insurrectionary act.” Cleaver professed to take pride in “defying . . . the white man’s law . . . and . . . defiling his women.”<sup>6</sup> One way to measure the gap between the Fifties and the Sixties is the trajectory of Cleaver’s self-invention from ex-con to icon, even to the point of a presidential candidacy on the Peace and Freedom Party ticket in 1968, a rise that would have been unimaginable a decade earlier.

“The White Negro” was not, however, just a lucky guess, an anomalous plunge into the torrents of history. For a quarter of a century or so, in various ways, Mailer was emblematic. The dust jacket of his breakthrough novel of World War II had summarized a paradigmatic experience, and provided with concision his c.v.: “Brooklyn, Harvard, Leyte [Gulf].” Having seen the rage and turmoil of the Sixties coming, he encapsulated the transfer of these emotions to the streets as well as anyone would in *The Armies of the Night*. No wonder that in 1971 the critic Wilfrid Sheed identified Mailer’s relevance as follows: “If he turns to contemplation, buy a prayer mat; if he stays with politics, expect huge voter turnouts. As Mailer goes, so goes the nation.”<sup>7</sup>

The mixed signals that cultural historians have picked up in the Fifties were not confined to serious writers, however. Even Broadway—so often dismissed as middlebrow—could be the site of a subversiveness that was primed to explode (and that

therefore needed to be contained). Exactly half a century ago this past September was the opening of *West Side Story*. It galvanized audiences with the “urban jazz” that, in a lecture delivered a year earlier, composer Leonard Bernstein had claimed made



Carl Van Vechten's portrait of Norman Mailer, 1948. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ62-42506].

the Broadway musical authentically American.<sup>8</sup> Urban jazz is what kept the American musical from being a facsimile of the European operetta or light opera. Bernstein’s own score may account for the proclivity of cultural historians to overlook this most operatic of major musicals in favor of films like *Blackboard Jungle* (whose young hoodlums dig rock ‘n’ roll) or *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) or *The Wild One* (1953).

In the Broadway production of *West Side Story*, “America”—its most political song—omitted mention of minority relations or prejudice. But only four years later, when *West Side Story* reached the screen, sensitivities had become more pronounced. “America” could be more explicit. The Sharks were allowed to resent the bigotry to which their ethnicity was subjected: “Everything right in America / If you’re a white in America.” In 1961 no other aria was so open about the gap between dream and reality that ethnic outsiders confronted. And yet, because the Fifties had not really ended, the anger that was about to boil over had to be countered: the girlfriends of the gang members make the case for consumerism and for the superiority of striving for upward mobility, in contrast with the Caribbean stagnation and poverty from which both the boys and the girls have fled: “I like the shores of America! / Comfort is yours in America! / Knobs on the doors in America, / Wall-to-wall floors in America!” By 1961, unlike

1957, attitudes toward the United States had become gendered.

Sex roles were supposed to remain sharply circumscribed, however: men were men, and women were housewives. For those who happened to have grown up white and male and straight in the Fifties, it was the *belle époque*—or, as the TV show had it, a period of “happy days.” For others, it was an era of decidedly crappy days. Modern feminism began, after all, in the family of the Fifties, with its accentuation of the virtues of domesticity (and the Sixties began with the divorce of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, which occurred in 1960). A distinctive female identity was so insecure in the Fifties that Susan Sontag occasionally wrote under the name of Susan Rieff. And in 1954, when the most famous American woman of the decade flew to Korea to entertain the U.S. troops there, the ID card of Marilyn Monroe listed her as “Mrs. Norma Jeane DiMaggio.”<sup>9</sup>

The self-assertiveness and the declarations of independence endorsed for so long now in American culture make a book like *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) in retrospect seem inevitable. The degree to which it administered greater shocks to the system than any other single volume of the last half-century therefore requires a gentle reminder of how embedded Betty Friedan was in the Fifties. Haunted by the shadow of totalitarianism, she denounced the suburban home (oxymoronically) as a “comfortable concentration camp.” Bewitched by the ideal of consensus, she took the legitimacy of capitalism for granted and denied that women had any unfinished political business (making democratic mobilization unnecessary). Indeed, the authorial voice of *The Feminine Mystique* was designed to conceal a radical past. The book makes psychology do the work of politics. Her account thus fails to imagine what it would provoke later in the decade. For the achievement of even the seemingly modest goals of economic inclusion would mean a transformation, the effects of which have yet to run their course.

The case for continuity has been compelling because historians tend to be suspicious of what might appear to be caesuras in the past. Little in human experience is created *ex nihilo*, and the likelihood that the most flamboyant politics of the Sixties could be traced to the outer edges of the culture of the Fifties is also bound to appeal to scholars who expect artists to have more sensitive antennae than the rest of us. Modernism was invented in the studios before it hit the streets. Change had to be imagined before (to paraphrase the French ‘68-ers) it could acquire power.

But a sound argument can also be pushed too far. When contradiction and conflict are emphasized at the expense of consensus, the Fifties cease to be a recognizable decade. After all, the members of the new middle class, sociologist C. Wright Mills observed in 1951, were “not radical, not liberal, not conservative, not reactionary; they are inactionary; they are out of it.”<sup>10</sup> The signature of that decade was political paralysis. Presidential candidate John F. Kennedy’s call to “get this country moving again”

energized movements just over the horizon. The middle class profiled by Mills was mild in the suites; its children would go wild in the streets.

By 1960 the United States had become the first society with more college or university students than farmers.<sup>12</sup> In October 1968 *Fortune* announced the results of a poll that identified two-fifths of American undergraduates as what the monthly magazine called “forerunners.” It asserted that they repudiated an interest in making money, that they tended to major in the humanities, and that they were likely to come from privileged homes. A plurality of these particular college students claimed to identify with the late Ernesto “Che” Guevara, who ranked ahead of the presidential candidates that the political system was projecting that fall: Nixon, Wallace, and Vice President Hubert Humphrey.<sup>13</sup>

What limits the case for the continuity of the two decades is that the isolated and uninfluential figures of the Fifties suddenly had allies, comrades, followers. Soon there were even fantasies that the radicalism of the young was irresistible, the opening salvo of a permanent revolution. For example, by the Freedom Summer of 1964 close to a thousand civil rights volunteers were estimated to have converged in Mississippi. Such numbers made the white supremacy that was earlier taken for granted seem less normal and less immutable. The South had become an embarrassment.

Another sign of historic change, and a second limitation to the thesis of continuity, is biographical. The lives of Fifties folk moved into unexpected political territory in the Sixties. The church that Tom Hayden had attended as a boy was the Shrine of the Little Flower, where the pastor was Father Charles Coughlin, the former radio priest who had been notorious for his denunciations of the New Deal. From that altar to the cutting edge of SDS and then to the defense table of the Chicago Seven represented quite a distance. In the Fifties Richard Avedon was so chic a fashion photographer that Fred Astaire was cast as “Dick Avery” in the 1957 Paramount musical *Funny Face*. By the end of the following decade, Avedon had become so politicized that he became the designated portraitist of Hayden and other members of the Chicago Seven.

How then might the turn of the Fifties into the Sixties be explained? Two possible answers can be considered here. One is that the discrepancy between the official or popular culture and the realities on the ground could no longer be disguised; the gap had become too wide to be concealed. The Fifties wanted to live within accepted conventions; the Sixties wished to be liberated. The Fifties instilled illusions; the Sixties opted for realism. The Fifties were reverent; the Sixties sought demystification.

The face of the military on Fifties television, for example, was benign, even amusing. No smile was more beguiling than that of Sgt. Ernie Bilko (Phil Silvers), even as he schemed to swindle the uniformed suckers of Fort Baxter in CBS’s *You’ll Never*

*Get Rich*, which ran from 1955 until 1959. Among its most devoted fans was a former military officer then residing at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. When he had to miss an episode, his press secretary asked that a print of that week’s show—it was always filmed—be sent to the White House.<sup>14</sup> For three straight years *You’ll Never Get Rich* won Emmies as the Best Comedy Series.

Then a war that escalated for almost the entire

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decade of the Sixties falsified the frivolity of Bilko’s motor pool. In November 1970 *Esquire* put on its cover a grinning military man, a real military man: Lieutenant William (Rusty) Calley, then awaiting trial for his pivotal role as a platoon leader in the My Lai massacre on March 16, 1968, in which his 23rd Americal Division Company (Charlie), along with Bravo Company, murdered about 500 Vietnamese civilians over the course of several hours, taking occasional breaks to smoke their cigarettes and to eat their rations, without ever facing a single round of enemy fire—and then for good measure burned the village and slaughtered the livestock as well. This orgy of violence the U.S. Army had managed to cover up for nearly two years.<sup>15</sup> *Esquire* photographed the smiling Calley surrounded by cheerful Southeast Asian children—hence the nickname of “the Killer Cover.” It was the most notorious of the ninety-two covers that George Lois did for the magazine (since 1962), the one that pushed farthest through the envelope of what a decade earlier would have been considered good taste. That *Esquire* had become immensely profitable, occupying a niche in the mass-circulation mainstream, suggests how markedly popular culture had shifted.

A second explanation for the arrival of the Sixties is that the assorted forms of repression—whether political or social or sexual—were simply too great for humans in an ostensibly open society to bear, too heavy for those exercising authority to impose or to sustain. The pressure was considerable enough that a reaction was almost mandated. The claims of order, restraint, and control were pushed so far that resistance built up from below. The demands of conformism had become too acute. That is why the Fifties proved to be the last decade over the span of American history—beginning with Tocqueville’s account of the “tyranny of the majority” and ending with William Whyte’s description of the “social ethic” of the organization man—in which the problem of conformism was integral to the diagnosis of the national character. Rigidity would pro-

voke recoil, and the excesses of homogeneity would elicit irrepressible yearnings for pleasure and freedom.

The Fifties offered Americans prosperity; never before had living standards been so high. What the decade could not promise was a wider scope for personal liberty, for autonomy, for equality, for a greater democratic inclusiveness that made the society safe for diversity. That is the work that began—or that began to pay off—in the Sixties. In 1950 Lionel Trilling could write—of those stigmatized by race or ethnicity—that “the excluded group has the same notion of life and the same aspirations as the excluding group.”<sup>16</sup>

A decade later, the excluded were showing far less eagerness for acceptance. By then it was obvious that not every black citizen wanted to join the club. For that change, Malcolm X should be credited. The “freedom” that integrationists sought, he sneered, was nothing more than “talking about getting a cup of coffee with a cracker”; and the citizenship that the Constitution seemed to promise was simply a delusion. Just because a cat gives birth in an oven, he is supposed to have observed, doesn’t make kittens biscuits. Those like himself who were usually designated as Negroes remained “nothing but Africans,” “Africans who are in America.”<sup>17</sup> In succeeding decades—when he was no longer alive to dispute such a status—he was sanctified as a “civil rights leader.” But what matters is that the note of nationalist defiance that Malcolm X struck could not have been heard in the immediate postwar period, when honest speech about race was muffled, and when the bleakness of the black condition could not be candidly discussed.

Such evasiveness is what the Sixties would decisively bury, apparently for good. Perhaps indirectness is something that cannot be consistently maintained; perhaps serious artists who operate within a culture that is free of governmental censorship must eventually incline toward truthfulness. The barriers against it simply had to be breached. Consider how the director Elia Kazan solved the problem of transposing Tennessee Williams’ 1947 drama, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, to the screen. On stage Blanche DuBois recalls what was wrong with her husband: “There was something different about the boy.” She sensed “a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn’t like a man’s.” And then she happened to discover him in a room with “an older man who had been his friend for years.” In 1951, however, homosexuality could not even be mentioned in a movie, and was considered by the American Psychiatric Association to be a mental disorder. The enforcers of Hollywood’s Production Code refused to allow Blanche’s husband to remain “a sex pervert.” So what could be more shameful in a decade in which a people of plenty confounded Marxist expectations of a renewed crisis of capitalism? What could be powerful enough to smash a marriage when that institution was sacrosanct? The boy was too “tweak” to keep a job; he was not a breadwinner.<sup>18</sup> It

is almost as if Blanche DuBois had somehow married into the family of Willy Loman. In straightening out the husband that Tennessee Williams gave her, Kazan's film adaptation entwined the special ideological inflections of the 1950s—and inadvertently disclosed why such impulses could not last.

*Stephen J. Whitfield holds the Max Richter Chair in American Civilization at Brandeis University. Among his many works on 20th-century America are The Culture of the Cold War, rev. ed. (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) and In Search of American Jewish Culture (University Press of New England, 1999).*

<sup>1</sup> Robert Lowell, "Memories of West Street and Lepke" and "Inauguration Day: January 1953," in *Collected Poems*, ed. Frank Bidart and David Gewanter (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003), 187, 117; Garry Wills, *Confessions of a Conservative* (Doubleday, 1979), 81.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Jonah Raskin, *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation* (University of California

Press, 2004), 68; Louis Ginsberg to Allen Ginsberg, December 12, 1955, in Allen and Louis Ginsberg, *Family Business: Selected Letters Between a Father and a Son*, ed. Michael Schumacher (St. Martin's, 2001), 32.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (Little, Brown, 1994), 327.

<sup>4</sup> Norman Mailer, *The Presidential Papers of Norman Mailer* (Bantam, 1964), 38, 43, and "The White Negro" (1957), in *Advertisements for Myself* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1959), 356.

<sup>5</sup> Hilary Mills, *Mailer: A Biography* (Empire Books, 1982), 290, 291.

<sup>6</sup> Mailer, "White Negro," 347; Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (McGraw-Hill, 1968), 13, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Wilfrid Sheed, "Norman Mailer: Genius or Nothing" (1971), in *The Morning After: Essays and Reviews* (Warner Paperback Library, 1972), 39.

<sup>8</sup> Leonard Bernstein, "American Musical Comedy" (1956), in *The Joy of Music* (Simon & Schuster, 1959), 172.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Sondheim, "America" (1957), in Robert Gottlieb and Robert Kimball, eds., *Reading Lyrics* (Pantheon, 2000), 587.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Ben Kramer, *Joe DiMaggio: The Hero's Life* (Simon and Schuster, 2000), 358.

<sup>11</sup> C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (Oxford University Press, 1951), 328.

<sup>12</sup> Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Bantam, 1987), 21.

<sup>13</sup> *Youth in Turmoil* (Time-Life Books, 1969), 15-16, 19, 37; Gitlin, *The Sixties*, 344.

<sup>14</sup> James L. Baughman, *Same Time, Same Station: Creating American Television, 1948-1961* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 135-36.

<sup>15</sup> Christian G. Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (Viking, 2003), 343.

<sup>16</sup> Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (Viking, 1950), 261n.

<sup>17</sup> Malcolm X, "At the Audubon" (1964) and "The Ballot or the Bullet" (1964), in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (Grove Press, 1965), 128, 36.

<sup>18</sup> Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Signet, 1974 [1947]), 95; Steven Cohan, *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (Indiana University Press, 1997), 254-55.

## HOW THE FIFTIES BECAME THE SIXTIES: A RESPONSE

Terry H. Anderson

Stephen Whitfield is to be applauded for tracing the literary and cultural Fifties origins of the Sixties, and he is correct when he states that the first era became the second because the "discrepancy between the official or popular culture and the realities on the ground could no longer be disguised." This is particularly true of the civil rights movement, for as one activist stated in 1960, the sit-ins were a "mass vomit against the hypocrisy of segregation."

Moreover, a new generation of activists had been raised in Cold War America. The Fifties were an unusually patriotic era in which teachers had baby boomers begin the school day with the Pledge of Allegiance, "with liberty and justice for all," and then students memorized the words of the Constitution, "We the People," and the Declaration of Independence, "All Men Are Created Equal." Yet when some of those students later marched in the South, they quickly realized that such words rang hollow. "The whole country was trapped in a lie," said Casey Hayden. "We were told about equality but we discovered it didn't exist."



Congress of Racial Equality march in memory of those killed in Birmingham bombings. Photograph by Thomas J. O'Halloran, September 22, 1963. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-U9-10515-6A].

There also were three technological developments that influenced the Fifties and led to the Sixties—atomic bombs, transistor radios, and TV. With the first Soviet bomb in 1949, followed by the development of ICBMs and the launching of *Sputnik* in 1957, a wave of atomic fear washed across America. Citizens learned the location of bomb shelters while the Eisenhower administration continued at-

mospheric bomb testing, as did the Soviets. That same year a *McCall's* article asked: "Will Tomorrow Come?" The next year radioactive strontium 90 began to show up in the nation's milk supply, and two-thirds of Americans listed nuclear war as the nation's most urgent problem. In response, and forming a bridge from the Fifties to the Sixties, Norman Cousins and others formed the Committee for a SANE Nuclear Policy, and only three months after the Greensboro sit-ins, over 15,000 citizens held a rally in New York City to end the nuclear arms race and negotiate a test ban treaty. During the next two years SANE was joined by what the press called "housewives" in Women Strike for Peace, and picketing began in front of the White House.

The development of the transistor radio was another technology that bridged the Fifties to the Sixties. The first transistor radio went on sale in 1954, but was too expensive for kids until Japanese imports began to drive the prices down after 1957 and throughout the 1960s. This portable device meant that kids could listen to their music, rock 'n' roll, virtually anywhere and anytime. "I use to listen to my

transistor all night in bed,” said one teenage girl, “until I ran the batteries dead.” The radio carried the tunes of a new generation, music that divided their generation from their parents, and began to express their youthful values, whether it was simply “shake, rattle, and roll” or white kids breaking the radio color line by singing along with the Supremes.

The massive expansion of television was the other key technological development. In 1950 very few people had televisions, but by 1960 Americans had bought 50 million, two for each home, and the national evening news was soon expanded from fifteen to thirty minutes. Civil rights was the first prime-time news story of the Sixties, presenting vicious images from the Jim Crow South and convincing many that change was not only necessary but mandatory if the nation was going to live up to its creed, and its Constitution.

Whitfield’s second assumption, that the political, social, and sexual repression was “simply too great for humans in an ostensibly open society to bear” is more problematic. He is correct concerning the political. The Cold War created a simplistic worldview. In the bipolar world the United States had to stand up and stop communist expansion at all costs, for if we did not, then one nation after another would “fall like dominoes” until the enemy was at our gate. “We are fighting in Korea,” declared President Truman, “so we won’t have to fight in Wichita, or in Chicago, or in New Orleans, or on San Francisco Bay.” A popular slogan in the Fifties was “Better Dead than Red,” but by 1960 such notions were being questioned in college classrooms by scholars and historians such as William Appleman Williams. By the Sixties many students were far more ready than their parents to discuss and debate Amer-

ica’s role in the world, which in a way led to *The Port Huron Statement*. Political repression also was manifested in McCarthyism. That crusade infringed on basic rights earlier in the Fifties but had waned by the Sixties. When HUAC held hearings in San Francisco to investigate communist activities in the spring of 1960, a thousand Berkeley students protested, resulting in police brutality and mass arrests. As one protester recalled, “That was the start of the Sixties for me.” The stand against sexual repression, however, did not result in activism until the first baby boomers arrived at college in 1964. In their dormitories they were faced with a catalogue of *in loco parentis* regulations, all aimed at restricting female behavior. Sexual repression didn’t seem to bother too many others during the Sixties, until after the 1968 Miss America Pageant when the media began to investigate the new women liberationist’s claims of legal, educational, and employment discrimination; the Seventies became the women’s (and gay’s) decade.

And the social repression was regional. While Whitfield’s argument might have merit in parts of the nation, the South was not an open society. James Silver applied a label to Mississippi in the early 1960s that characterized the entire Deep South: “The Closed Society.” White Southerners and their politicians had done virtually everything to maintain white supremacy, including ignoring federal laws and court orders, so the only way for change was, as Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed, “federal commitment, full, unequivocal, and unremitting.” When presidents used federal power and signed key legislation, Jim Crow died.

There also was a demographic reason for the rise of the 1960s—the baby boom. The birthrate

had been rather low during the Depression and World War II, but returning veterans and their new brides quickly reversed that trend. By 1950 there were 8 million more children than demographers had predicted, and with over 4 million births annually throughout the 1950s, the World War II generation created a Sixties generation of some 45 million kids that would turn 18 between 1960 and 1972. That unprecedented flood of youth would have had an impact on the United States even if they had never protested. But, as it tuned out, they had cause to rebel.

Finally, the Fifties became the Sixties because of a federal institution—the Supreme Court of Chief Justice Earl Warren. Beginning with the *Brown* case in 1954 the Court chipped away at the legal status quo, first concerning race, but then moving against other restrictive state and federal laws in the late 1950s. In *Yates* (1957), *Scales* (1959), and *Albertson* (1965) the Court surprised the nation, overturning convictions of Communist Party members, ending the loyalty pledge, reestablishing personal and political liberties, and upholding the First and Fourteenth Amendments. Such cases provoked discussion about individual rights, ended the McCarthy era’s legal restrictions on political dissent, and again opened the door to marches and protest, which came to symbolize the Sixties.

*Terry H. Anderson is professor of history at Texas A&M University, specializing in modern U.S. history. He is the author of The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee (Oxford University Press, 1995) and The Sixties, 3rd ed. (Longman, 2007).*