

## The Crisis of the Liberal State

By the early 1960s the liberal style of government modeled by Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal had enjoyed many triumphs. Not only had New Deal programs like Social Security been gradually expanded, but the Great Society program of President Johnson had added several new features to the social welfare state, most notably the Medicare/Medicaid system. At the same time, the national government had, for the first time since Reconstruction, taken strong steps to protect the civil rights of African-Americans. Yet, for all these successes, there were also signs that liberal politics were in trouble.

The Vietnam conflict was one factor in the erosion of confidence in the government. American involvement went back to the period immediately following World War Two. The U.S. had assisted France in its efforts to reclaim Vietnam as part of its Southeast Asian colonial possessions, but the French military was unable to defeat the communist dominated Vietnamese nationalist forces. In 1954 an international conference in Geneva temporarily divided the country between the North, controlled by a Communist government, and the South, controlled by a regime friendly to the United States. The Geneva Accords called for free elections to be held in 1956 to reunify the country. Ultimately, however, the President of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, refused to call the elections, recognizing that the more populous North would likely win. The Communist regime in the North, led by Ho Chi Minh, then began to recruit and arm South Vietnamese insurgents to destabilize the South. The United States, which supported Diem's government, became increasingly heavily involved, providing military aid and training to the South Vietnamese government. By the early 1960s, however, it became increasingly clear that these efforts were not working. The key question then became whether the United States would take the next step and become directly involved in combat operations.

The U.S. decision to take this step stemmed from several factors. Domestic political considerations played at least a partial role in President Johnson's decision to escalate American involvement. Recognizing that Truman and the Democrats had been attacked for "losing" China to the Communists, Johnson was determined that his opponents would not be able to use similar charges against him: that he had "lost" Vietnam. There was also a belief in the "domino" theory -- that if Vietnam fell to communism then it became more likely that other nations would fall as well. Many foreign policy makers argued that failure to support the South Vietnamese regime would be taken as a sign of weakness by other nations, which would then be more likely to side with the Communist powers (the Soviet Union and China). It was likewise argued that these Communist powers would become more aggressive in their efforts to spread revolution throughout the world if they were not confronted at every point. Others, however, pointed at the grave risks involved. They suggested that while U.S. prestige would suffer if South Vietnam fell to communism, the ultimate damage to American prestige and influence would be infinitely greater if it committed forces and then failed to win. They also noted that it was extremely likely that the U.S. would fail, just as France had before.

Despite these warnings, President Johnson did take steps to escalate American involvement. In 1964 two reported incidents of clashes between American naval vessels and North Vietnam ships became the

basis for the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which essentially gave Johnson a blank check to use direct military force in Vietnam. What followed was a rapid increase in American troop levels and engagement in direct combat operations. Very quickly, though, the problems inherent in fighting this war became evident. In the Korean conflict the struggle had been largely fought as a conventional war with the opposing forces pretty clearly defined. In Vietnam, however, the initial American objective was not to stop a direct Northern invasion but to suppress the communist inspired uprising, with South Vietnamese Viet Cong guerillas waging a covert war against the South Vietnamese army. Intrinsicly this made winning the war difficult, since there was no specific terrain to conquer or invaders to drive out. As with most such guerilla wars, the ultimate objective of the rebels was not to win outright, but to keep the conflict going long enough to exhaust the other side. American efforts were also intrinsicly limited by the threat of provoking a larger conflict. North Vietnamese forces (and through them the South Vietnamese rebels) were being supplied by both the Soviets and Chinese. The U.S. launched a massive bombing campaign against the North, but because the ultimate source of the weapons and supplies fueling the rebellion in the South weren't actually being produced there, it had little impact other than infuriating the Northern population and ensuring their support for the communist regime. The U.S. could not interdict the ultimate source of these supplies because this would mean destroying Soviet or Chinese transport vessels and possibly provoking World War Three. Instead, the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces attempted to stop the flow of military material from North to South by attacking the supply routes along the Ho Chi Minh trail. At the same time, they were trying to suppress Viet Cong activity in the South. They were successful at neither and the growing devastation to Southern society simply fueled the chaos, creating the conditions for even more disgruntled South Vietnamese to take up arms against their government.

As the war dragged on, the American public became increasingly disillusioned with the conflict and their government. Year after year the addition of more American troops and resources seemed to simply lead to greater casualties and chaos. The fact that this was also the first war to really be covered closely by television also ensured that Americans were well aware of the constant combat operations. While many Americans continued to support the war and its goals, the anti-war movement gained ever greater strength, particularly on college campuses. The country was increasingly fractured and disrupted by the war and the debate over whether the U.S. was achieving anything worthwhile through the steady expenditure of American funds and soldiers' lives. The majority Democratic party itself was badly splintered by this debate, with some arguing for continuing commitment to the containment doctrine, and others arguing for an immediate withdrawal from Vietnam.

A key turning point came in 1968 when the Viet Cong launched what became known as the Tet Offensive. Briefly, communist insurgents were able to attack and capture some key South Vietnamese bases and cities. On a tactical level, the offensive was disastrous for the Viet Cong. Shifting to more conventional warfare and trying to take territory simply did not work against the well equipped American forces. However, in a strategic sense it was a victory for the communists. It illustrated to the American public that the opposing forces were still very much a threat, despite promises by the military leadership that the conflict was almost over. The failure of the Democratic administration to win the

war helped ensure the victory of the Republican candidate in 1968: Richard Nixon. Indeed, Nixon had campaigned on a platform that assured the public that he had a plan to bring the war to an end.

Democratic control of the government was also threatened by growing conflicts over social and cultural changes in the country. The party's shift towards supporting civil rights had badly damaged the party's traditional base in the white South, and this period marked the beginning of a gradual drift of white Southern voters from the Democrats to the Republicans.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the civil rights movement continued to expand. Up to the mid 1960s African-American activists and government focus had been on ending the legal inequalities associated with segregation. With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, long strides had been taken to dismantle legalized racial segregation in the United States. However, this still left the problem of informal (de facto) segregation in the North and the persistent problem of cultural racism. Particularly in Northern cities, many African-Americans found themselves trapped in rotting urban "ghettos", unable to access the educational or occupational resources to work their way out. The Great Society had tried to create programs to address these issues, but progress was very slow. Frustration with the lack of progress encouraged the development of more radical movements which suggested that liberal government did not offer the solutions that African-Americans needed. Groups like the Nation of Islam suggested that black separatism was a better solution -- that African-Americans needed to divorce themselves from white liberal politicians and look to their own communities for solutions. Others, like the Black Panthers, adopted Marxist rhetoric, arguing that the entire capitalist system needed to be overthrown before racism could truly be defeated. While most African-Americans continued to pursue civil rights progress by working within the existing political and economic system, these high-profile groups posed a more radical challenge to American society.

The pursuit of civil rights was not limited to African-Americans. Women, for instance, continued to push for legal changes that would eliminate persistent inequalities in areas such as education and job opportunities through organizations such as NOW (the National Organization of Women). Native-Americans were similarly active in seeking greater protection under the law. In the 1960s and 1970s numerous court cases sought to reclaim land and water rights granted by treaties that had long been ignored by the federal government. Hispanic-Americans similarly sought to achieve greater equality. Under Cesar Chavez, for instance, the United Farm Workers pushed for equal recognition of farm workers under existing labor laws. Most civil rights activism of this era was not particularly extreme. Activists simply sought greater access to political and economic opportunities within the existing system.

Yet, these various civil rights movements were also trying to change American culture in a variety of ways. The goals of the feminist movement, for instance, were not to just change the legal system, but to challenge cultural perceptions of women. Similarly, the emerging youth movement challenged traditional values. Groups like the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) argued not only for legal changes, such as a lower age for voting rights, but a cultural rejection of the materialistic consumer culture. Young people, particularly on college campuses, embraced the "Counter-Culture" of "sex, drugs, and rock n' roll". In part this reflected pure hedonism, but beneath this there was also a serious critique of American society. Increasingly Americans had come to accept the benefits of a

corporate/industrial society which emphasized the joys of prosperity and consumption. The youth movement challenged this corporate society as oppressive to the individual and ultimately superficial. They expressed an individualistic yearning for something more than two cars in the garage in the garage and a nice home in the suburbs.

Ironically, even as some young people were rejecting the materialistic prosperity of the industrial society, this prosperity was beginning to slip away. American society was also increasingly troubled by fundamental economic changes. Since the late 19th century the United States had been the great industrial superpower of the world, but by the 1960s American industry was suffering from a number of problems. The industrial base had been rebuilt during World War II, but during the decades that followed re-investment in technology and more efficient production techniques had declined. At the same time, overseas competition was growing. In 1946 the American steel industry had supplied 60% of the world's production: by 1978 this had fallen to 16%. Increasingly the U.S. was importing steel from Germany and Japan, which had invested heavily in rebuilding their heavy industries after the war. Similar competition emerged in the auto industry. For most of the 20th century U.S. car makers had dominated global production, but by the late 1960s foreign auto manufactures, particularly in Germany and Japan, began to produce cars that were increasingly of better quality and which offered lower gas mileage -- a factor that became particularly important because of the gas crisis of the 1970s. In many other categories similar trends emerged. American products were being replaced by foreign imports, leading to the slow erosion of domestic industrial jobs. These jobs were replaced by employment in a burgeoning service sector, but these new jobs often didn't offer the type of benefits, wages and stability that industrial work had in the past. By the 1980s hourly wage rates had become either static or witnessed actual decline. This decline in individual income was offset in part by the growing number of married women working, ensuring that more families had dual incomes. Nonetheless, the underlying reality was that Americans were working harder for less.

The turmoil of this era contributed to the political problems faced by the Democratic party. Since the 1930s the Democrats had generally been the majority party in national government, but this situation began to change in the 1960s. The cultural upheaval of this decade frightened many Americans, leading them to re-emphasize more traditional values. Richard Nixon would refer to this group as the "Silent Majority": the vast majority of Americans who weren't out in the streets protesting for change. Similarly, the evident failures of the Democratic administration in bringing the Vietnam conflict to a successful conclusion increasingly eroded public confidence not only with their party, but with government in general. After a generation which had generally trusted the government to do what was right for the American people, an emerging generation was increasingly suspicious of government action. There were also basic structural changes which affected the Democratic party. The New Deal coalition had brought together racial and ethnic minorities and working-class Americans in general. The party depended upon support from these groups for their financial base and electoral support. By the late 1960s, however, the union movement was beginning to decline as the United States shifted from an industrial to a service sector economy. At the same time many white working people became uneasy as the focus of the Democratic party shifted from programs that primarily benefited them (such as support for unions or minimum wage laws) to civil rights legislation. This particularly became an issue as a result

of the country's growing economic problems. By the election of 1968 a significant number of white working people would shift their allegiances from the Democratic party to the Republican party. The erosion of the New Deal coalition helped set the stage for Richard Nixon's victories in 1968 and 1972.