

UNIT 8 Social Transitions
Early Contemporary Era 1960 to 1980

A STEIN SCHOOL
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HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION EARLY CONTEMPORARY ERA, 1960-1980

WITH JIM SOTO



SPEAK YOUR MIND

The 1960s began a time of transition in America. As Americans clashed over concerns such as racism and the Vietnam War, social unrest grew more prevalent. Faced with growing discontent, many found their voices and began expressing themselves through writing and speaking. The desires, emotions, and injustices of the people were displayed, as evident through much of the literature from the time, in an effort to rally citizens to a growing number of causes and inspire change in America.

What qualities in written and oral communication can bring about inspiration?

Take a minute to consider and answer the question.

A TIME OF UPHEAVAL



It was a turbulent time in America. The decade of the 60s was fraught with international crises, nuclear brinkmanship, war, civil unrest, and cultural upheaval. America underwent a metamorphosis as radical as any decade in history. Change was evident in every facet of our daily lives.

EARLY CONTEMPORARY ERA

To have a better understanding of the literature of the Early Contemporary Era it is necessary to consider the important domestic and international milestones marking the second half of the twentieth century.

Included are:

- The Turbulent Sixties
 - Race Relations
- The Vietnam Conflict
- Grassroots Movements
- Politics in the Seventies

1. THE TURBULENT SIXTIES

When **John F. Kennedy** won the 1960 presidential election, it seemed to many Americans that a new age had dawned. Kennedy pointed the nation toward a New Frontier and proposed a number of social and economic initiatives, including a sweeping civil rights bill and ambitious space exploration program.



In foreign policy, however, Kennedy continued the Cold War politics of the 1950s and further escalated tension with the Soviets. In October 1962, when a U.S. spy plane detected Soviet missile sites in Cuba, Kennedy warned the Soviets to remove them or face war. For the 13 days of the **Cuban Missile Crisis**, the threat of nuclear war was all too real.





These events led the Soviet Union, the U.S., and the U.K. to negotiate the first of many treaties limiting the testing and use of nuclear arms. However, the arms race continued unabated, with each side stockpiling weapons to deter the other side from making a first strike. Cold War tensions also led to construction of the **Berlin Wall**, which halted migration from East Germany (occupied by the Soviets) to West Germany (occupied by England, the U.S., and France.)

2. RACE RELATIONS



Race relations had become a central issue in the United States following the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision ruling “separate but equal schools” President **Lyndon B. Johnson** carried on his predecessor’s civil rights policies. The court ruled that State-sanctioned segregation of public schools was a violation of the 14th Amendment and was therefore unconstitutional.

President Johnson pressed for passage of the **Civil Rights Act of 1964**, which protected against discrimination in accommodations and employment and tied federal education funding to school desegregation. **The Voting Rights Act of 1965** followed, protecting against discrimination at the polls.





After winning the elections of 1964, Johnson initiated a legislative program designed to build the **Great Society**. He pushed his **War on Poverty** initiatives through Congress, increasing funds for housing, health care for the poor and elderly, education. Passage of this legislation initiated a political debate between advocates of increased domestic spending and supporters of greater defense spending that still continues into this day.



Despite these successes, frustration with discrimination and poverty ignited major race riots in several U.S. cities. Following the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Robert Kennedy in 1968, the nation was in a state of shock.

3. THE VIETNAM CONFLICT

The U.S. entered the Vietnam War because of its Cold War foreign policy of containing communism and its belief that if one country fell to communism, neighboring countries would also fall. The U.S. government viewed the conflict as part of a larger struggle against global communism and believed that supporting South Vietnam would prevent the spread of communism in Southeast Asia. Additionally, the Gulf of Tonkin incident, in which North Vietnamese boats allegedly attacked U.S. naval vessels, provided a pretext for increased U.S. involvement in the conflict.





As U.S. troop involvement and casualties escalated, so did Americans' opposition to the war, eventually leading to widespread antiwar demonstrations.

The protests were connected to a larger counterculture rebellion among American youth born after the end of World War II, now dubbed the baby boomers. Growing up in the relatively prosperous 1950s, these youth rebelled against the nation's materialistic values and conformity.

4. GRASSROOTS MOVEMENTS



Although some of the extremes of the 1960s vanished, the Civil Rights movement and Vietnam War protests demonstrated the power of grassroots political organizing to bring about change. This lesson was especially inspiring to those concerned about women's rights and the environment.

When a presidential commission reported on discrimination against women in the workplace, Congress responded with the Equal Pay Act in 1963.

In 1968, Apollo 8 astronauts photographed planet Earth while returning from their pioneering orbital flight around the moon. This image of Earth—small, fragile, beautiful, and unique—made an immediate impact on Americans and stirred interest in environmental issues. Congress responded by passing legislation to protect the environment.



5. POLITICS IN THE SEVENTIES

In 1968, Republican Richard Nixon was elected to the White House. While he fulfilled his election promise to withdraw troops from Vietnam, he launched an unsuccessful invasion of Cambodia in 1970. In 1973, a cease fire was reached with Vietnam, formally ending the war.



The Nixon administration pursued a policy of détente, or improved relations, with the Soviet Union, negotiating the first of a series of Strategic Arms Limitation Treaties (SALT).

Nixon's term came to an abrupt end, however, when he resigned following hearings on 1972 election improprieties, including the break-in at Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate Hotel. Nixon was succeeded by his vice president, Gerald Ford.



During the Ford administration, the country faced economic struggles, including high inflation and unemployment rates, which were exacerbated by the 1973 oil crisis. Additionally, Ford's handling of foreign policy issues, such as the fall of Saigon in 1975 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, was criticized.

Jimmy Carter's presidency was marked by similar economic challenges, as well as a crisis of confidence in the government and institutions. The Iran Hostage Crisis, in which 52 Americans were held captive in Tehran for 444 days, also occurred during Carter's presidency.





Overall, the failures of these administrations led to a sense of disillusionment and frustration among the American public, as well as a loss of trust in the government's ability to effectively address pressing issues. This led to Carter's defeat by Ronald Reagan in 1980.

ASSESSMENT

After reading pages 712-718 in your book, complete the following activity:

1. Imagine that you had been active in one of the movements for change, such as the Civil Rights movement, the women's movement, or the environmental movement. Discuss your reasons for having joined one of the groups, the projects for which you volunteered, and the accomplishments (or failures) of the work you did. Do so in no less than 300 words.
2. Which of the previously discussed domestic and international milestones is most important to you? Explain why.



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