

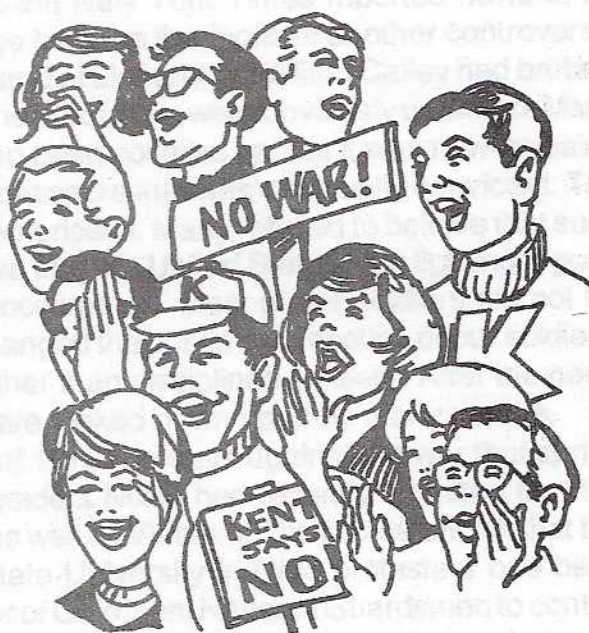
1968–1970: A Time of Turmoil

The years from 1968 to 1970 were among the most difficult in American history. The war in Vietnam had severely divided the American people. This division led to several painful events from which our country is still recovering.

In the spring of 1968 Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy were vying to become the Democratic **nominee** for the presidency. Both candidates opposed continuing the war in Vietnam and were running neck and neck. Eugene McCarthy had received a great deal of support from student volunteers. Robert Kennedy, the younger brother of former president John F. Kennedy, had assembled many of the same supporters who had backed his brother's campaigns. Either candidate would likely have been acceptable to those people opposed to the war. In May, Robert Kennedy narrowly won the California primary, virtually assuring that he would be the Democratic nominee. However, as he made his victory speech, an assassin sprang from the crowd and fatally shot Kennedy. Kennedy was the second prominent leader to be assassinated that spring. Two months earlier, civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., had been assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.

The Democratic convention of 1968 was held in Chicago. With the death of Robert Kennedy, the nomination went to Hubert Humphrey, a candidate committed to continuing the war. The Chicago convention became a scene of violence and division within the Democratic party. Within the convention hall, delegates fiercely debated the merits of continuing the war. However, the real conflict occurred in the streets outside the convention center. Thousands of war protesters gathered in Chicago. Many of the protesters had been supporters of McCarthy or Kennedy and were angry that no candidate opposed to the war was being offered. Chicago mayor Richard Daley took a hard line against the protesters. He **mobilized** 5,000 National Guardsmen and the entire Chicago police force to confront the demonstrators. What had been a peaceful march turned into a police riot. The police beat and arrested hundreds of demonstrators, as well as dozens of innocent **bystanders**. Hundreds of people required medical attention. Television cameras were present to record the convention for the evening news; they recorded the demonstrations and the riot as well. Some Americans supported the brutal actions of the police against the protesters, but most people were horrified. America was further divided.

The protests continued after the Republican candidate, Richard Nixon, was elected. Nixon pledged to achieve "peace with honor," but progress was slow. On November 15, 1969, an estimated 500,000 protesters from all parts of the country descended upon Washington, D.C., to march against the war. It was the largest protest of the war, and thousands were arrested. Support for continuing the war was clearly disintegrating.



Students at Kent State University were fired upon by National Guardsmen after an anti-war demonstration got out of hand.

The day after the Washington march, the New York Times reported news of an **atroc**ity at My Lai. The tiny Vietnamese village became the focus of another controversy. At My Lai, American soldiers under the command of Lieutenant William Calley had brutally massacred over a hundred Vietnamese civilians. All of them were obviously unarmed. Many were small children and babies. The event had been covered up, but it was now revealed to the public. Calley had to stand trial for the massacre and was eventually convicted. The news of the massacre was a shock for many Americans. Many refused to believe that such an event was possible. They wanted to believe that the United States was fighting a good war. The event at My Lai was not a normal occurrence. Most of our soldiers did not kill innocent civilians, but the My Lai massacre changed the public's perception of our soldiers. They started to view them as brutal killers rather than disciplined soldiers. After the news of My Lai, soldiers returning from Vietnam were looked down upon by many people.

A final tragedy occurred in the spring of 1970. Protests against the war that spring had been large and occasionally violent. President Nixon had recently admitted that the United States was now fighting in Cambodia as well as Vietnam. The protesters felt that the war was dragging hopelessly on. At Kent State University in Ohio protesters had been especially active. James Rhodes, the governor of Ohio, sent National Guardsmen to control the demonstrators. The Guardsmen were not trained for such action and were obviously overwhelmed by the task. On May 4, several young Guardsmen opened fire on the protesters, killing four people and wounding several others. Once again, the nation was stunned and outraged. Unarmed Americans had been shot by the military. Demonstrations flowed across America, closing down many schools and colleges.

The protests continued for the **dur**ation of the war. While some people found the protesters offensive, others considered them morally superior. The American people, once united in outlook, had become bitterly divided over the war in Vietnam. Faith was lost in our political leaders, in our educational institutions, and in the "American way of life." People were to remain divided as long as American participation in the Vietnam War continued.

Think About It

1. The events at the Chicago convention and at Kent State were eye-opening experiences for the American people. At these places government forces had used excessive violence against people protesting the war. How do you think people's attitudes toward the government, police, and military changed as a result of these events?

2. Many older Americans were angry with the young protesters. Can you understand why? How were the values of older Americans different from the young protesters'?

Dictionary Exercises

Find definitions to the following words:

1. Nominee
2. Mobilized
3. Bystanders
4. Atroc
5. Duration

Name _____ Date _____

Challenges

1. Which two presidential candidates opposed continuing the war in Vietnam?

2. Which two national figures were assassinated in 1968?

3. What were Hubert Humphrey's views on the war?

4. Where was the 1968 Democratic convention held?

5. Who was elected president in 1968? What political party did he belong to?

6. Why was the attack on the village of My Lai considered an atrocity?

7. Who was the commanding officer who stood trial for the massacre?

8. How did this incident change Americans' opinions of soldiers?

9. In addition to Vietnam, what other country was the United States fighting in by 1970?

10. What happened at Kent State University in 1970?
