

# American history: the 1960s



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Looking back through the annals of history, the 1960s stands out as a highly important decade in American History. During this decade, the United States was rocked by political scandal in the form of the Bay of Pigs incident and widespread terror and fear in the form of the Cuban Missile Crisis that followed in its wake. In addition, the African-American Civil Rights Movement hit its stride, becoming one of the most powerful and most frequently covered events in the media as African-Americans spoke out and protested against the racial inequalities and segregation that they had been forced to endure for so long.

This was also a decade of great loss, and many prominent figureheads, such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and John and Robert Kennedy in the Modern Civil Rights Movement were the targets of assassin s bullets and taken from this world. The 1960s was a tumultuous but undeniably important decade in American history and is easily one of the most important times in the development of our nation.

The Bay of Pigs invasion was an attempt made by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) on behalf of the United States government to lead trained Cuban exiles in a plan to invade Cuba and overthrow the government of Fidel Castro. This plan was a colossal failure on the part of the United States government which led to public embarrassment for the United States on the global stage. Relations between the two governments had already been quite strained after Fidel Castro came into power in 1959 but the Bay of Pigs incident strained relations between the two nations to their breaking point. In retrospect, it is amazing that the Bay of Pigs invasion was given approval by

the President but some historical scholars have likened this problem to a lack of proper communication between the office of the President and the CIA.

The Cuban Missile Crisis was an international incident that occurred when United States military intelligence discovered the existence of several nuclear missiles in various spots throughout Cuba that had apparently been supplied by the Soviet Union. The United States immediately began to try to convince Cuba to disarm and dispose of the missiles. This led to a period of short-lived but widespread fear that Cuba was prepared to launch these missiles at the United States and of a possible invasion. Faced with the wide range of overt political and economic maneuvers against the Castro regime, it was not unreasonable for Cuban and Soviet leaders to be concerned in 1962 over intensified U. S. hostile action against Cuba, including the possibility of an invasion (Steinberg).

Once the missiles were discovered, the United States was in a very difficult political position in that it must be decided to either take offensive action against Cuba or do something less proactive while still achieving the same goal of Cuba's disarmament and disposal of the missiles. The only way in which domestic politics have been generally thought to have affected the U. S.'s behavior was by providing a generalized incitement to the Kennedy administration to do something about Cuba and the Soviet missiles (McKeown).

At this point, there was immense pressure on the President to act which resulted in what is considered to be poor decision making. The Cuban Missile Crisis was a very important event in American history to look back and

reflect upon not only because of the event itself but because of the impact it had on American politics as a whole. This is the closest the United States has ever come to thermonuclear war and resulted in numerous changes to American foreign policy and other relations with foreign nations.

In the 1960s, the modern Civil Rights Movement hit its stride in which several prominent figures rose into the spotlight and several nonviolent protests were acted out to secure the basic civil rights that African-Americans had been denied for so long. Led by many prominent and well respected leaders, these rights were hard won and required a great deal of effort from the African-American community as a whole.

One of the earliest and most prominent protests of the 1960s was undertaken by African Americans taking rides on interstate busses heading into southern states, where the buses had yet to be integrated. The Montgomery Bus Boycott of the 1950s likely laid much of the groundwork needed for these Freedom Rides to be organized and carried out. Most of these rides were sponsored by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and were instrumental in integrating and de-segregating both seating on the busses themselves and the interstate bus terminals. These rides were highly dangerous for African-Americans at the time and many of the residents of those southern states did not take well to blacks attempting to circumvent the Jim Crow Laws which were the norm of southern states at the time. Despite being backed by recent federal rulings that it was unconstitutional to segregate bus riders, the Freedom Riders met with obstinate resistance — as in Birmingham and Montgomery, where white supremacists attacked bus depots themselves (Gross).

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X are widely regarded as two of the most prominent African-American figures during the Modern Civil Rights Movement but, as prominent as the two men were; their views on how the Civil Rights Movement should be carried out were vastly dissimilar. Dr. King was very outspoken in his fight against the injustices suffered at the hands of African-Americans at the time but despite the violence that African-Americans were typically met with in their protests, he asserted a policy of nonviolent resistance. In his famous Letter from Birmingham Jail, King asserts that Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored (King). This speaks to his position of advocacy of nonviolent resistance that sends a powerful and unavoidable message.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail is widely considered to be one of the single most important pieces of protest literature to be written during the modern Civil Rights Movement and one of Dr. King's biggest achievements. In this letter, Dr. King reasserted his stance on the use of nonviolent means of protest as the means of advancing the interests of the African-American people while appealing to his fellow members of the Alabama clergy. This letter was instrumental in the fight towards black civil rights and is widely regarded to be one of the most important pieces of such writing in history.

Malcolm X on the other hand preached a very different policy in regards to the methodology that should be used by African-Americans in securing their civil rights. In his By Any Means Necessary speech, he asserts that We

declare our right on this earth to be a man, to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this society, on this earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary (Malcolm X). In saying this, Malcolm X is clearly asserting that African-Americans should fight for their rights and attain them at all costs, even if they must resort to violence. He also asserts during a speech at the Ford Auditorium. So I don't believe in violence — that's why I want to stop it. And you can't stop it with love, not love of those things down there, no. So, we only mean vigorous action in self-defense and that vigorous action we feel we're justified in initiating by any means necessary (Ali).

During the mid and late 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement lost two of its most prominent figures. In 1965, Malcolm X, who had until then been a very outspoken figurehead of Black Nationalism, was assassinated in New York City as he was trying to deliver a speech. Malcolm X was largely considered to be a political and ideological leader of the Civil Rights Movement and his death was one that greatly impacted the movement.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination occurred much later in the decade, on April 4, 1968. While standing on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee, Dr. King was fatally shot. News of his assassination led to rioting in dozens of cities across America. However, the outcome of his assassination could largely be attributed as marking the end of the modern Civil Rights Movement. The United States government was essentially forced into abolishing the segregationist policies that existed at the time.

The assassinations of these two individuals both had different effects on the modern Civil Rights Movement as a whole. The assassination of Malcolm X led to a different sort of impact on the Civil Rights Movement. Due to Malcolm X's highly publicized departure from the Nation of Islam, his assassination was largely attributed to members of the Nation of Islam, creating tension between black Islamic and Muslim groups.

In addition, two other prominent figures in the fight for African-American civil rights were assassinated as well, and these two people were both brothers, John and Robert Kennedy. John F. Kennedy hadn't been a very vocal civil rights activist in his time as President and preceding his death but despite that, he was instrumental in passing key civil rights legislation and took a stand against racial segregation in many instances. For example, when former Alabama Governor George Wallace stood in front of the University of Alabama doors, barring two black students from registering for classes, President Kennedy intervened. Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach called President Kennedy and alerted him to what Wallace was doing; President Kennedy federalized the Alabama National Guard to help with the crisis. Ultimately, Wallace stepped aside and the two students were allowed to register for classes (Elliott).

Robert Kennedy was a very outspoken figure in the fight for African-American civil rights and spoke publicly against segregationist policies and the racism that permeated many aspects of American culture and institutions. Robert Kennedy was a prime candidate for election in the 1968 Presidential election and built much of his campaign on the platform of

African-American Civil Rights and believed that the foundations of American integrity should be based on equality for all American citizens.

On April 4, 1968, after he had learned of Dr. King's assassination, Robert Kennedy delivered an impromptu speech in Indianapolis, Indiana which is largely said to be a prime contributor to the fact that, despite the riots that had broken out in dozens of cities across America when news of Dr. King's death spread, Indianapolis remained calm in the wake of such news.

Unfortunately, on June 6, 1968, Robert Kennedy was assassinated by a man named Sirhan Sirhan.

It is clear that the 1960s has had a great impact on American society and culture as a whole. From the United States teetering on the brink of nuclear war with both Cuba and the Soviet Union as a result of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in the Cuban Missile Crisis to the massive growth and successes of the Modern Civil Rights Movement to the loss of such key public figures that arose out of and around that movement, there were massive shifts in American politics. This was indeed a very tumultuous time in American history but it was also a time of great sociocultural and political growth for the United States and is unquestionably one of the most important decades in our history and study of this decade is highly important to further growth and prosperity.