

Major Problems in American History Chapter 13 Synthesis Questions

Were the sixties a decade of hedonism, or heightened social responsibility?

The sixties were a time of “heightened social responsibility,” both for the government and the people. Clearly, the central government was unwilling to give into a self-indulgent hedonism and the lack of order that would likely result. While Vice President Spiro Agnew (Document 7) calls the amount of student demonstrators “impudent” because to him they appear to undermine traditional American congressional lawmaking by taking to the street in rowdy crowds to achieve the legislation they want. His point of view is clearly careful — clearly not hedonistic — which is influenced by his background of being the vice president of conservative Republican President Nixon. Even so, he believes that Americans should “question the credentials of their leaders” and give a “healthy in-depth examination of policies and constructive realignment.” In other words, he strives for a cleansing of the political system, but one that is “healthy” and “constructive,” a belief in the responsibility of the government to reform itself to fit the people’s needs. Liberal Presidents Kennedy and Johnson before him also believed in a strong social responsibility of Americans (Document 2) to work together in “the struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself.” While Kennedy’s liberal platform is much more optimistic (e.g., believing that “a new generation of Americans has come” and that “survival and success of liberty” will result from people working together against these societal evils) and his inaugural speech is chronologically earlier than most of the riotous movement of the riotous protests, his later cooperation with civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King show his support for organized, peaceful riots. Following Kennedy’s passing, LBJ continued his legacy with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to legislatively help racial and gender equality. As usual, these presidents and the federal government hoped to keep balance and promote healthy social change, not the occasional violence that sometimes came. And they certainly did not endorse hedonism, only helping the essential rights of people such as improved voting rights and anti-discrimination laws for blacks and women.

The demonstrators too advocated for social change because they felt it was justified. They did not encourage rash and irrational action and personal pleasure, but had good reason to ask for the social changes they requested. Carl Wittman wrote in his “Gay Manifesto” (Document 9) that homosexuals had been tormented and were forced to flee to the “refugee camp” of San Francisco, and that they “have been drummed out of the armed services, thrown out of schools, fired from jobs, beaten by punks and policeman.” The protection he seeks from the government is for basic survival and equality. Likewise, the Columbia student who protested that long hair for men should not be condemned (Document 6) believed in his basic American right of freedom to expression. He argues that “medical science has yet to discover any positive correlation between hair length and anything — intelligence, vanity, morality, cavities, cancer — anything.” While this isn’t a necessity for survival, nor is it a hedonistic claim that wastes government efforts, such as a hypothetical claim to the right of free government handouts or the like. Rather, the student is demonstrating his American right to freedom against unnecessary government suppression against superficial items like long hair. Similarly, Cmiel’s essay details the rise of an extremely liberal and sometimes violent “counterculture” that characterized the 1960s, little about it was inherently wrong. The only potential deviations from “social responsibility” may be the rise of drug abuse, but that is a personal preference, not a social norm. People fought for black nationalism

with both civil and more desperate ways, but it was always out of frustration and the want and responsibility for societal improvement that drove these struggles, never a completely selfish motive.

These liberal movements most strongly represents the theme of American and National Identity, in which Americans fight out of necessity or out of the defense of their national liberties rather than for selfish needs. America is fundamentally for the people, and the surge of pro-change politics that happened through the use of demonstrations, especially during the time of high mistrust of government during the Vietnam War, exemplifies this American spirit of fighting for one's rights.

How and why did both the Left and Right become radical by the end of the decade?

The Left became radical out of the desire for freedom and the Right out of the desire for order. Generally speaking, the Leftists were the demonstrators: for racial, women's, and gender equality. Activists became more radical by openly defying the government with open demonstrations, such as the student demonstrator at Columbia University (Document 6): they were stationed there to "look [out for] radical leftists." Even despite the fear of being arrested, many demonstrators openly flouted their right of freedom. Civil Rights advocates marched in the thousands such as at Washington D.C. and Selma, and bus boycotts such as the one in Montgomery, and sit-ins such as those in Woolworth occurred, and Freedom Riders rode through the South. But in many cases, especially the latter, violence erupted. In Birmingham, MLK's peaceful marches were met by fire hoses and dogs and arrests, radical Rightist opposition. Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam eventually advocated for more extreme methods, such as violence, and more extreme goals, such as complete black separatism. Sometimes it was simply ideology that became so radical because suppressed groups felt a need for independence, such as with black separatism and also homosexual beliefs. Carl Wittman wrote openly against the ancient rite of marriage, claiming that it is "a contract that smothers both people, denies needs, and places impossible demands on both people" (Document 9) Clearly this sounds somewhat irrational and very radical, but it was born out of the need to survive against suppression from the majority heterosexual population.

More specifically, Cmiel's essay clearly delineates the process of the Leftists becoming more radical in terms of civility. At the beginning of the decade, there was a great push by Civil Rights advocates and other demonstrators for freedom to protect civility over civil rights. The benefits of a civil, equal society had to be felt by the opponent conservative Rightists. But as peaceful protests didn't seem to create many policy changes to help the Leftists, they became more frustrated and radical. The Rightists became more radical to counter the radical Leftists. All in all, this is the ultimate showdown of American Culture and Society, showing that there exists a dynamic equilibrium always in its culture: every radical Leftist movement triggers a Rightist reaction, and vice versa. This is similar to the constant shift back and forth between the liberal and conservative (Democratic and Republican) parties in government, as both are necessary to balance one another out.

But while there was a more radical shift in the culture of the common people, the government stayed amazing level-headed. While the beginning of the century began with a Democratic, liberal administration (JFK and LBJ), it ended up with a conservative, Republican one (Nixon). The Supreme Court was originally more conservative but became more liberal under Chief Justice Earl Warren. Both JFK's (Document 2) and Nixon's administrations (Document 7) held similar beliefs that the nation ought to undergo political and social change, and they certainly did not call for radical measures to carry this out. The executive branch of government held both moderate calls for change (leaning Left) and order to counter these drastic changes (leaning Right) that allowed social change to happen smoothly.

Which changes initiated in the sixties are still with us today, and who “won” the culture wars?

The advocates for social change arguably “won” the culture wars. Despite conservatives’ wants to restore old orders of society, the most fundamental American desire for freedom won out. As a result, better women’s rights, racial equality, and homosexual rights have improved since the 1960s’ “culture wars.” It is obvious that “long hair” for men (and likewise short, boy-ish hair for women) is not considered socially unacceptable anymore, as it used to during the 1960s (Document 6). And now, with gay marriage legalized and an increasing awareness of LGBT rights in the US, it’s not difficult to see that homosexual rights have advanced as well, largely due to the efforts of people such as Carl Wittman (Document 9). Both President Kennedy (who spoke of working together as a “new generation of Americans” (Document 2) against social evils) and Vice President Spiro Agnew (who talked about a routine, in-depth inspection of American government and society (Document 7) were not adverse to some degree of social liberal change, as well as President Johnson (who initiated multiple welfare programs such as Medicare, Medicaid, and the “War on Poverty”) and President Nixon (who created the EPA in response to rising waves of environmentalism). Cmiel writes in his essay about the increasing degree of American counterculture rebelling for social change, caring less for civility and more for civil rights and equality as time went on. All of these changes in social culture, spanning the anti-war movement, the civil rights movement, and a push for women’s and gender equality worked together to spawn a highly liberal push towards equality in society. Therefore, the Leftists arguably “won” the culture wars, albeit with heavy opposition and setbacks (e.g., the blockage of the ERA by antifeminists, the assassination of the civil rights leaders MLK, Malcolm X, and JFK, etc.) from the conservative Rightists.