



**The Columbia  
Guide to America in the  
1960s**

**David Farber and Beth Bailey**

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**THE COLUMBIA GUIDE TO**

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America in the 1960s

The Columbia Guides to American History and Cultures

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America in the 1960s

*David Farber and Beth Bailey*  
*with contributors*

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## INTRODUCTION

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The Sixties era was among the most colorful, complex, and eventful periods in American history. More than any other decade of the twentieth century, the 1960s continue to be the subject of passionate debate and political controversy in the United States, a touchstone in struggles over the meaning of the American past and the direction of the nation's future. Amid all the polemics and the myths, making sense of the 1960s and its legacies is a real challenge. This book is for all those who want to try.

Because there are so many "Sixties," this volume offers multiple approaches to the era and different perspectives on it. We hope that readers will treat *The Columbia Guide to the 1960s* as a kind of toolkit. Each section of the book provides a different tool for understanding the decade, and readers can use various combinations of these tools to construct histories of the Sixties that are most suited to their interests, needs, and levels of knowledge.

This book is divided into six sections. The first offers a narrative overview of the era. It serves as a clear and accessible introduction to the 1960s for those who know little about them and provides a historical perspective for those who lived through the tumultuous events of the decade.

In the second section, "Debating the Sixties," ten essays by prominent historians discuss some of the most significant issues of the era—ranging from the Vietnam War to race relations to the sexual revolution—and their legacies. Each essay provides an overview of current historiographical debates for students and scholars, as well as for readers interested in how the Sixties have been interpreted by scholars and other writers. These essays also take a stand: each of the authors ends by explaining his or her position in the debate.

The third section, "The Sixties A to Z," contains alphabetically organized entries on some of the most interesting and significant people of the era, as well as on its major events and movements. This section supplements the nar-

rative section, offering biographical information and more detailed discussion of specific events. It also serves as a stand-alone reference. Eight brief topical essays follow it. These present overviews of important topics that are not covered in detail in the book's narrative section.

The fourth section focuses on the Sixties as most Americans lived them. What were the most popular songs in 1962? How many young men received student deferments from the draft and how many served in Vietnam? What was the average age at marriage in 1965? Who won the World Series in 1967? How many pounds of beef did the average American eat each year? What was Richard Nixon's campaign slogan? Clearly organized by topic, this section offers the sort of information that is often dismissed, ignored, or forgotten in traditional histories. The facts and figures and opinions contained here make it possible for readers to create their own histories of daily life in 1960s America.

The fifth section is a brief chronology, useful as a quick orientation to the decade or as a supplement to the narrative.

The sixth and final section of this work is an extensive annotated bibliography, organized by topic. The bibliography gives a sense of the enormous range and depth of writing on the 1960s, and readers who are interested in exploring specific subjects in more depth will find ample resources here.

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America in the 1960s

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PART I

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## **The American Sixties: A Brief History**



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## CHAPTER ONE

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# John Kennedy and the Promise of Leadership

*This chapter provides an overview of Cold War liberalism. Most major Republican and Democratic politicians shared a vision of domestic harmony based on economic growth and of world leadership based on anticommunist interventionism. President Kennedy is profiled and the nation's prosperity is highlighted.*

### THE POSTWAR ERA: COLD WAR PROSPERITY

In the presidential election year of 1960, the United States was the richest and most powerful nation on earth. A country of some 180 million people, the United States had undergone immense changes in the 15 years since the end of World War II. Few would have guessed, in 1960, that even greater challenges still lay ahead for the American people.

World War II had been a transition between two completely different eras in American life. Before the wartime mobilization, unemployment and poverty had torn at the fabric of tens of millions of American families. Up until December 7, 1941, the day of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, a large majority of Americans had demanded that the United States remain isolated from the complicated affairs of Europe and Asia. World War II changed these facts of American life as it brought an end both to the economic downturn of the 1930s and to American isolationism.

In the postwar years the sustained growth of the economy surprised economists and corporate leaders at the same time as it encouraged the growth of families across the nation. Less well-received but generally accepted by the American people were the United States' new military and economic commitments to nations throughout the world. By 1960 these unexpected results of World War II—domestic prosperity and global responsibility—had become fundamental aspects of American life. Post-World War II American internationalism was forged in the horrors of the global conflagration and hardened during the nearly worldwide chaos and conflict that followed. For reasons of

both national security and international economic development, President Harry Truman and most leading members of Congress had decided that the United States must do what it could to shape the postwar world order. The internationalist resolve of American policymakers was greatly fortified by their fear of Soviet expansionism.

After World War II the Soviets, in the words of Winston Churchill, Great Britain's wartime leader, had drawn an "Iron Curtain" over most of Eastern and Central Europe. The Soviets had suffered 20 million dead in the war, and Soviet leader Josef Stalin had insisted that, for his country's own security, the nations of Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania must be kept under the control of the Soviet Union.

The Soviet takeover, the economic and political instability in most of the rest of Europe, which had been devastated by war, and then the successful communist takeover of China in 1949 greatly strengthened the commitment of American political leaders to an unprecedented international role. Based on a policy of "containment," or the freezing of Soviet aggression and influence in the world, the United States, between 1948 and 1951, gave \$13 billion in foreign aid through the Marshall Plan to rebuild Western European countries, especially France, Great Britain, and West Germany. In 1949, the United States established the North Atlantic Treaty Organization with Canada and ten noncommunist European nations. This mutual defense pact was founded on the premise that any attack on a member state would be considered an attack against them all. A system of military trip wires was eventually set up around the world to convey the message that attacking an American ally meant going to war with the United States.

The reach of that military commitment became clear both to the American people and the rest of the world on June 25, 1950, when communist North Korean forces attempted to impose their political system and create one nation on the Korean peninsula. Although at that time Korea was of no direct economic or security interest to the United States, President Truman, under the impression that Soviet Premier Stalin was behind the North Korean offensive, vowed: "We've got to stop the sons of bitches right here and right now."<sup>1</sup>

Under the aegis of the newly organized United Nations, the United States led the way in protecting noncommunist South Korea against the attack. The United States military, which formed the preponderance of the UN's international forces, fought in Korea from the summer of 1950 until the summer of 1953. Some 33,642 Americans lost their lives beating back North Korean and Communist Chinese troops and restoring the South Korean government.

By 1960, the United States, a nation that before World War II had refused to maintain a strong military force and had stationed no troops outside its own territories, was assuming military responsibilities around the world. Hundreds of thousands of American fighting men were stationed throughout Europe and Asia, and aboard ships that patrolled the oceans of the world. Approximately 20,000 nuclear warheads stood at the ready to annihilate America's enemies. The cold war standoff against the Soviet Union, the second strongest military power in the world, was at the heart of the United States' immense military commitment. And in 1960, the cold war was heating up. Even as the cold war, with its threats of nuclear devastation, darkened many Americans' outlook, tens of millions of American families enjoyed material abundance. New technologies—most importantly television and a host of electric appliances—had created new ways of life for Americans. Between 1929 and 1960, the gross national product had exploded from \$181.8 billion to \$439.9 billion, and personal consumption over the same period had grown from \$128.1 billion to \$298.1 billion. As the world's leading producer of autos, steel, electric appliances, and textiles, the United States easily dominated the world economy, much of which was still recovering from wartime devastation.

In the summer of 1959, Vice President Richard Nixon had made the case for American-style free-market economics in the heart of the enemy's camp. At a trade fair in Moscow, Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev toured the exhibits, each boasting of his nation's greatness. Khrushchev seemed to get the better of Nixon when he proclaimed Soviet superiority in missile technology. Only two years earlier the Soviets had been the first nation to deploy successfully an intercontinental ballistic missile, and shortly thereafter, on October 4, 1957, the Soviets had been the first to orbit a satellite around the Earth: the world-famed *Sputnik*, weighing just 184 pounds.

Nixon knew that the Soviets led the Americans in the space race, but he believed the United States was ahead in matters of far greater importance to most people, Soviet, American, or otherwise. Nixon brought the Soviet premier over to the centerpiece of the American trade-fair exhibit. It was a full-scale model of a typical suburban tract home. Nixon pointed out the "push-button" kitchen with its gleaming counters, hot and cold running water, and electric appliances. With a wave at those affordable pleasures, Nixon concluded: "To us, diversity, the right to choose . . . is the most important thing. . . . We have many manufacturers and many different kinds of washing machines so that housewives have a choice. . . . Would it not be better to compete in the relative merits of washing machines than in the strength of rockets?"<sup>2</sup>

Prosperity and the cold war were wrapped up together in Nixon's pithy explanation of the American way of life. In 1960 those two central themes—fighting communism abroad and maintaining prosperity at home—dominated the presidential election campaign and the politics of most, if by no means all, Americans.

### *The Election*

The two candidates for president of the United States in 1960 shared many characteristics. Both were men born in the twentieth century—a presidential-election first. Both had been junior officers in the navy during World War II. And both, upon their discharge, had almost immediately gone into politics and enjoyed meteoric careers. On critical policy matters little divided them.

Richard Nixon had grown up in a middle-class family in Whittier, California. Extremely ambitious, intellectually incisive, and an immensely diligent worker, he won a scholarship to Duke Law School and, soon after graduating, went to war. In 1946 he was one of many veterans elected to Congress.

In Washington, Nixon recognized that anticommunism was the “hot button” issue of the day and became one of the fiercest anticommunists in Congress. He gained a national reputation by proving that a high-ranking official in the State Department, Alger Hiss, had associated with a known Communist and then lied about his relationship. In 1950, Nixon was elected to the United States Senate and, just two years later, became Dwight D. Eisenhower's vice president.

John Kennedy, too, had been elected to the United States House of Representatives in 1946. In 1952 he was elected senator from Massachusetts. Whereas Nixon was a self-made man, Kennedy was the son of Joseph P. Kennedy, a former diplomat and one of the richest men in the nation. Family wealth and connections helped place Kennedy on the political fast track. His own intelligence, discipline, charm, and good looks moved him quickly along that track. Kennedy's marriage to the chic and beautiful Jacqueline Bouvier in 1953 added another valuable element to his charismatic public image.

The 1960 election was dominated by the twin themes of cold war internationalism and national prosperity. Both candidates promised to make the United States even stronger and more prosperous. Nixon, the two-term vice president, ran on the favorable record of President Eisenhower. His theme song was “Merrily We Roll Along,” and his platform echoed the Cold War internationalism of both Truman and Eisenhower. In his acceptance speech for the Republican Party nomination, he blasted Soviet communism, warning

of “the mortal danger it presents,” and insisted that the American people must be ready to defend themselves against not only overt military threats but also “the even more deadly danger of the [communist] propaganda that warps the mind.”<sup>3</sup>

John Kennedy accepted the Democratic Party presidential nomination with a not dissimilar speech. He, too, spoke of standing up to communism at home and around the world. He added, however, a more stirring call: “We are not here to curse the darkness, but to light the candle that can guide us through that darkness to a safe and sane future. . . . We stand today on the edge of a New Frontier.”<sup>4</sup> While their core policies did not appear to differ in significant ways, John Kennedy more successfully presented himself to the American people as a leader capable of moving the nation forward into a new era.

Winning with the narrowest of margins—just 112,881 votes out of over 68 million votes cast—John Kennedy became the next president. Some attributed his victory to his dashing appearance in a televised debate with Richard Nixon, whose sallow complexion, sweaty brow, and five-o’clock shadow did not serve him well on the era’s black-and-white television screens. Others pointed, more pragmatically, to Kennedy’s success in winning large majorities among African Americans, many of whom hoped that the young Democrat would follow the lead of President Harry Truman and work for racial justice in the United States.

Critically, Kennedy’s religion—he was only the second Catholic to run for the presidency—had not hurt him at the polls. Unlike Al Smith in the election of 1928, when the Irish-Catholic politician had faced a sizeable anti-Catholic vote, Kennedy experienced little religiously inspired backlash. In one of the many hopeful signs of a changing America, Kennedy’s election signaled that at least some of the old, traditional prejudices that divided Americans were fading from the scene.

## THE KENNEDY PRESIDENCY

John Kennedy had promised the American people even greater prosperity and more energetic leadership in the fight against world communism. For most of his presidency, these two issues would dominate his agenda.

President Kennedy believed that the federal government could and should play a vital role in both stabilizing the economy and in fueling economic growth. Here, he differed from Nixon and Eisenhower. Kennedy was follow-

ing the conventional wisdom of political liberals dating from the late years of the New Deal. President Truman and congressional liberals had institutionalized this belief through the Employment Act of 1946, which created the Council of Economic Advisors (CEA). Through the CEA, leading economists advised the president on creating federal government policies aimed at maximizing jobs, production, and consumer purchasing power. President Eisenhower had rejected the pro-growth, government-intervention policies of liberal economists. John Kennedy put those economic policies at the front and center of his administration.

Pointing at the economic slowdown or “Eisenhower Recession” of 1959–1960, Kennedy, during his campaign, had promised that, as president, he would insure that the American economy grew by five per cent a year. Once elected, Kennedy immediately began to forge an economic policy dedicated to what some have called “growth liberalism.”<sup>5</sup> To stimulate the economy, Kennedy offered a large income-tax cut and special tax breaks for businesses that invested in new machinery and equipment. Second, to help more Americans become productive and capable workers, Kennedy moved a series of education, training, and manpower-development bills through Congress.

While these initiatives made few headlines or excited many people, overall they worked. Between 1961 and 1965, Kennedy’s economic promise to the American people was made good with an average yearly economic growth of more than five per cent. At the beginning of 1966, with Kennedy’s policies fully in place, the unemployment rate (which in the nightmare year of 1933 had reached some 25 per cent) had dropped to less than four per cent. The number of Americans living in poverty fell from more than one out of five in 1960 to about one in seven by 1966.

Prosperity in the United States in the early and mid-1960s reached unprecedented levels. The journalist Theodore White argued that this economic boom produced “a new generation of Americans who saw the world differently from their fathers. [They believed] . . . that whatever Americans wished to make happen, would happen.”<sup>6</sup> Americans, in the words of writer Tom Wolfe, were living in the midst of a “happiness explosion.”<sup>7</sup>

While the United States economy hummed along, stimulated by liberal government policies, the Kennedy administration faced a series of cold war crises. These global events tested the courage and capacity of both President Kennedy and the entire nation. In his eloquent inaugural address, Kennedy had staked out a militant cold war position: “Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any

hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty. This much we pledge—and more.”<sup>8</sup>

Kennedy was to act almost immediately on his pledge. His first opportunity to prove his mettle involved Cuba, just 90 miles off the shores of Florida. In 1959, after Fidel Castro and his guerrilla army had overthrown a corrupt dictator, Cuba became the first Latin American nation to embrace Soviet-style Communism. Just days after Kennedy became president, representatives from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) explained to him that they had trained over 1,400 anti-Castro Cubans to invade Cuba and ignite a popular revolt against the Communist government. Without consulting Congress or the American people, Kennedy approved the operation.

On April 17, 1961, the CIA-supported force landed at the Bay of Pigs on the southern tip of Cuba. They were met by the Cuban army, which remained loyal to Castro. The outgunned invaders were trapped. While the CIA urged Kennedy to send in American air support, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev warned, “Cuba is not alone.”<sup>9</sup>

Faced with an escalating military situation, as well as the anger of other Latin American nations fearing American intervention in their own domestic affairs, Kennedy chose to do nothing. Trained and assisted by Americans, the invasion force, after suffering heavy casualties, surrendered to its Communist foes. Kennedy had begun his presidency with a resounding foreign-policy failure.

Nonetheless, Kennedy continued to try to bring down the Castro government. The CIA plotted to assassinate the Communist leader and, under the code name Operation Mongoose, sponsored guerrilla attacks on Cuba. As hostilities between the two nations increased, Castro in September 1962 arranged with Khrushchev to base in Cuba ballistic missiles armed with nuclear warheads. Only weeks earlier, President Kennedy had explicitly warned Khrushchev not to use Cuba as a site from which to threaten the United States. Thinking Kennedy was weak, Khrushchev ignored the warning.

On October 16, President Kennedy learned from his national-security advisors what the Soviets had done. Over the next seven days, Kennedy and his most trusted men, including his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, debated the options. After seriously considering an immediate air attack on the missile sites, Kennedy chose instead a less belligerent plan. He went before the American people, told them what had happened, and said what he felt he must do: “We will not prematurely or unnecessarily risk the costs of worldwide nuclear war, in which even the fruits of victory would be ashes in



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