The Sixties in the United States in Historical Perspective[1]

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Abstract

The decade of the 1960s in the United States is commonly viewed and taught as a series of traditional dichotomies, white vs. black, male vs. female, liberal vs. conservative, communist vs. anti-communist. Recent American scholarship on this period reveals a much more complex interplay of forces and movements. President John F. Kennedy's government was attacked for its policy toward the Soviet Union and communism in general, from both the right and the left. Political conservatism witnessed a revival at the expense of the then-dominant liberal culture. Martin Luther King promoted an economic and social agenda that went well beyond the vision of "I Have a Dream". Together, these forces enacted a second American "Civil War", which was a much more complex struggle than is commonly understood or taught. The History educator dealing with USA in the FET history curriculum is exposed to some interesting information to be utilised and debated in classrooms.

Keywords: Civil War; Liberal (liberalism); Conservative; Left (left-wing) anti-communist; Coalition; New Deal; USA; 1960's; History curriculum.

Introduction

When the southern American novelist, William Faulkner, reminds us that "the past is never dead, it isn't even past", he was of course speaking of the legacy of the American Civil War, the terrible conflict of the 1860s which cost so many lives.

The 1960s were in many ways a continuation of that earlier period of civil struggle. A recent history of the period refers to that decade as "the Civil War of the 1960s". President Kennedy, in response to the Birmingham, Alabama violence of mid-1963, proposed far-reaching civil rights legislation as a way of

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continuing the work of President Lincoln (Flamm and Steigerwald 2008:79).

Certain aspects of this "civil war" are of particular interest to the school history student in South Africa and to the history instructor, and have been subject to recent fresh re-examinations.

The goals of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the "Black freedom movement", President Kennedy's role in the liberal anti-communist crusade, the three-way struggle for political dominance in the US, between liberal, radical , and conservative voices, and the fracturing of the movement for women's liberation, were all part of this "civil war" and have left legacies in the America of today.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Franklin D. Roosevelt's immediate successors sought to follow the presumed trajectory of his earlier leadership as they continued the development of social welfare programs, up to and including "the Great Society" of President Johnson. In the international sphere, following the Rooseveltian struggle against fascism, later liberal leaders, from President Harry S Truman onward aimed to check the expansion of communist power, almost anywhere in the world. The policy of "containment" of communist aggression was intended to accomplish this goal. Members of the liberal elite "believed that defeating the communists was without doubt the most urgent cause of the 1950s" (Flamm and Steigerwald 2008:7).

At the beginning of the 60s, the new President and liberal leader, John F. Kennedy, stated his commitment to this position, in his inaugural address, as he called upon the nation to be prepared to bear burdens, meet hardships, support friends and oppose foes, to assure the success of liberty. Later confrontations with communist powers, including the Soviet Union over Cuba and particularly the government of North Viet Nam can be viewed as expressions of this liberal struggle with an international communist movement led by the resurgent Soviet Union of the 1950s and 60s.

Almost from the beginning of the Kennedy administration, the new President found his foreign policy under attack from two directions. Kennedy's approval of the invasion of Cuba, by anti-Castro Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs, generated criticism from both the right and the left. Conservative critics attacked the administration for failing to follow through in support of what promised to be a successful effort to push the pro-Soviet Castro off of his seat of power before he had become too comfortable and entrenched. Left-wing

critics such as I.F. Stone, C. Wright Mills, and Staughton Lynd all attacked what they perceived to be the attempt to undermine a genuinely popular revolution against the capitalist power structure and Yankee imperialism, in the western hemisphere. This marked the beginning of the development of a coalition of anti-administration groups and individuals of what would eventually come to be called "the New Left".

This grouping found their suspicions of Kennedy to be confirmed by what they considered to be his suicidally dangerous approach to the resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. While even conservative critics were temporarily won over by Kennedy's apparent tough response to the placement of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba, critics from the left thought and said that the President had been extremely fool-hardy, to have risked nuclear disaster over the issue. They also believed that Kennedy's belligerent approach was another demonstration of American imperialist over reach in what the administration seemed to view as America's "backyard" (Flamm and Steigerwald 2008:42, 43).

Concern over this response led to the creation of broad-based anti-nuclear weapons coalitions such as Citizens for a Sane Nuclear Policy and Women's Strike for Peace which included many who would not have considered themselves to be leftists, but who would support this cause from a position to the left of the liberal center.

However, it was the US support for the anti-communist government of South Viet Nam which led to the creation of widespread support for leftward based groups of opposition to the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. This left-wing opposition was not afraid to stake out its position against the liberal leadership of the Democratic Party. In late 1965 Carl Oglesby, President of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) made clear that the policy makers of the Johnson administration were "not moral monsters… . They are all liberals." His conclusion was that liberalism itself was fundamentally flawed as only a flawed system of thought could produce such an evil policy. Liberalism's very anti-communism was evidence of its falsity as this was motivated by general opposition to popular revolution against unjust power structures.

The development of opposition to the war in Vietnam, outside of traditional political structures is well known. What is less often focused on is the growth of involvement in institutional politics by anti-war individuals and groups. This began with the Eugene McCarthy campaign, in the spring of 1968, to

unseat President Johnson as the Democratic Party nominee for re-election. It then led to President Johnson's abandonment of his re-election bid that year and culminated in the dominance of the party's nomination process and the essential re-construction of the party during the 1972 election cycle (Flamm and Steigerwald 2008:47, 55).

Assault on the liberal center came also from a resurgent and often ignored conservative movement during this time as well. The most obvious evidence of this conservative recovery from twenty years in the political wilderness (since the administration of President Roosevelt) was the failed presidential nomination of Arizona Senator, Barry M Goldwater. Goldwater's nomination was effected by a coalition for groups and individuals within the Republican Party who opposed both the liberal social welfare programs of the Kennedy and Johnson Democratic administrations and the equivalent individuals within their own party, such as New York governor Nelson Rockefeller. While these groups supported a vigorous war effort in Viet Nam and against other communist centers, such as Cuba, they abhorred the apparent liberal willingness to negotiate with a totalitarian ideology, especially a nuclear-armed one.

The 1964 Goldwater campaign for the presidency resulted in a disastrous defeat for the Republican Party. However, two signs of the future rise of a new conservative governing coalition could be seen in that year. One of the most effective spokesmen for the Republican cause turned out to be a former B-grade Hollywood leading man, Ronald Reagan. In a series of public appearances on Goldwater's behalf, including a highly effective television address delivered virtually on the eve of the election, Reagan established himself as a possible future political candidate and public office holder. In 1966, this conservative vision bore fruit when Reagan defeated the incumbent Democratic governor of the largest of the US states, California. While California governor, he generated national attention as he confronted left-wing students and groups on the campuses of the state university systems. This national attention grew to national support and eventually led to Reagan's one failed (1976) and two successful (1980, 1984) presidential election campaigns (2012 Isserman and Kazin:205, 206).

The other sign of conservative resurgence was found in the student world, of all places. While left-wing student politics captured public attention due to its confrontational tactics, right-wing student groups, including the Intercollegiate Society of Individualists (ISI) and especially Young Americans

for Freedom (YAF, established two years before the SDS) were putting together grassroots organizations which would eventually provide the manpower (and womanpower) of the successful Reagan presidential campaigns and the Reagan and Bush presidential administrations. YAF grew to over 350 individual campus groups and more than 30 000 student members, across America, at the very height of the anti-Viet Nam protests (Isserman and Kazin 2012:202, 203; Flamm and Steigerwald 2008:103, 104). This was approximately the same size as the SDS at the beginning of 1968. Despite this, one common and respected South African grade 12 textbook makes the claim that "Nearly all students were opposed to the war in Viet Nam." YAFs "opposition" to the war could be fairly summarized by the view that it believed that the war was not pursued vigorously enough.

While Viet Nam dominated America's foreign policy agenda during the 1960s, the Black Freedom Movement was the domestic center of attention during, at least, the first half of the decade and the man who dominated this movement was Martin Luther King, Jr. While the external facts of King's leadership of this movement are well-known, his inner ideological motivations are subject to more dispute and are less well-known.

King had been educated in a variety of intellectual traditions which led him to critique the American social and economic system in a way that has not always been clear from many historical accounts. First trained in the social gospel tradition and later in the less optimistic, more realist, neo-orthodox school of Reinhold Niebuhr, King criticized the American class structure and distribution of wealth from early in his public ministry (Jackson 2007:4, 5). In this regard, King's roots were to found in a democratic socialist tradition that itself illustrated the tension between the anti-communist liberal perspective and that of the so-called democratic left, discussed earlier. As a result, he sought to build coalitions and break down dualistic oppositions such as with Malcolm X, which existed in the popular media. King's dialectic approach led him to attempt the construction of syntheses that would join apparently opposed strategies and goals (Jackson 2007:6, 7).

One of King's priorities was the construction of a new three-part, progressive coalition which would both reinvigorate and replace the older New Deal coalition of the Democratic Party. This envisaged the bringing together of black Americans from across class lines (King hoped to incorporate the resources of the black middle class into the struggle of the black poor.) with white liberals, who already supported the integration project, and the

predominantly white working class and trade union leadership. The purposes of such a coalition included the overcoming of white/black dichotomies in the struggle for civil rights, the enlistment of economically advantaged union organized white workers in the struggle for a more equitable economic order and the eventual replacement of the liberal individualistic social vision with a more socially holistic one (Jackson 2007:7, 8).

The failure of such a coalition, to develop, led King to seek other approaches. Reliable trade union support was difficult to come by as most union leaders were more concerned to protect the gains of their own (mostly white) membership, than they were to extend support to other, possibly competing, groups. For instance, King attempted to incorporate poor blacks more fully into the New Deal social welfare structure, to strengthen the black economic position within America. He also sought to marry efforts to register black voters (to secure the political base of black Americans) with campaigns of direct confrontation with local authorities. King found white resistance to be both more determined and more violent than he originally expected. However, vigorous (or violent) enough white resistance often generated Federal (national) government intervention and eventually helped to produce King's intended ends (Jackson 2007:3). The most significant such case was Birmingham, Alabama Public Safety Commissioner "Bull" Connor's use of attack dogs and high pressure hoses, in some cases on young children, which led to such public reaction that President Kennedy, finally introduced the long-awaited Civil Rights Bill to the US Congress.

During the 1960s, King also began to develop an anti-colonial critique which he then used to broaden the scope and application of his domestic struggle. This led him to abandon the liberal anti-communist cold war rhetoric of his earlier leadership approach (Jackson 2007:11, 12). Meetings with Kwame Nkrumah helped to strengthen that trend. King's application of this critique led him to publicly turn against the war in Viet Nam and to put at risk the support of President Johnson for future civil rights legislation and enforcement.

Martin Luther King, Jr. is often portrayed as simply a "civil rights" leader, primarily concerned with racial discrimination (Jackson 2007:2, 3). In fact, in his willingness to use both class and race as ways of critiquing American society, brought together anti-segregation, anti-poverty, and anti-war positions (Jackson:331). King's thought and his tactical approaches were both complex and evolving throughout the period of his leadership. Economic and social

justice was the constant goal.

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