

THE LONG SIXTIES

AMERICA, 1955-1973



Christopher B. Strain

WILEY Blackwell

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This edition first published 2017

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Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Strain, Christopher B., 1970– author.

Title: The long sixties: America, 1955–1973 / Christopher B. Strain.

Description: Chichester, UK; Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2016. | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016000144 | ISBN 9780470673621 (cloth) | ISBN 9780470673638 (pbk.) |

ISBN 9781119150442 (ePub) | ISBN 9781119150411 (Adobe PDF)

Subjects: LCSH: United States–History–1953–1961. | United States–History–1961–1969. |

United States–Social conditions–20th century.

Classification: LCC E839.S83 2016 | DDC 973.92–dc23

LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2016000144>

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image: Bill Owens Archive

Set in 10.5/13pt Minion by SPi Global, Pondicherry, India

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Preface: The Long Sixties

The 1960s was a turbulent decade. On this much we can agree. Beyond this simple assertion, however, what happened is still hotly contested. It was a time of great change and confusion, marked by a profound shift in values and punctuated by a profane and often ugly war, but consensus breaks down on the meanings and lessons therein. For some it was a time of great liberation and freedom, an Age of Aquarius when restrictive constraints fell away. For others it was a period when the United States lost its way, a Pandora's box that unleashed a host of social ills upon an otherwise idyllic world. For some it was heaven, others hell. For many it was both.

Attempting to explain that paradox, this book aims to provide a brief narrative history of the 1960s—a quick trip, as it were, through a momentous decade. Ironically but intentionally, *The Long Sixties* is a short book that makes no claim at being inclusive. Rather, it attempts to overlay a coherent narrative on a sometimes incoherent time—providing a feel for the decade while emphasizing some important persons, places, and events along the way.

It is important in doing so to distinguish between *the 1960s*—a discrete period of time beginning in 1960 and ending in 1970—and *the Sixties*: a collage of people, places, happenings, ideas, beliefs, impressions, feelings, perceptions, and stereotypes. Often used interchangeably, they are in fact two different things, involving different reference points that render different representations. “The 1960s,” for example, connotes datelines and headlines but “the Sixties”—more of an idea than a decade—suggests peace signs, flower power, and Volkswagen Bugs. Unlike the 1960s, the beginning and end of the Sixties are marked less by dates than by symbols and turning points. The 1960s and the Sixties shape and mold one another, often blending together in contemporary understandings of this contentious moment in time.



“Tell me about the Byrds and the Beatles.”

Figure 0.1 The 1960s are often misunderstood... (Source: © www.CartoonStock.com, artist: Andrew Toos).

Since the early 2000s, some civil rights scholars have identified a “long civil rights movement”—not simply the familiar set of events between the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., but the period *before* the *Brown* case, when NAACP attorneys battled Jim Crow in the courts and black veterans of World War II returned from fighting against totalitarianism abroad to battle segregation at home. The long civil rights movement also extends beyond King’s death into the Black Power era, understood less as a break with the nonviolent civil rights movement and more as a logical outgrowth and continuation of it. In this framework, antecedents and codas become part of the story itself. This study borrows the same logic to contemplate “the long Sixties” in the hope that doing so might beneficially complicate our understanding of the decade. With scholars now tracing the origins of the civil rights movement at least back to the 1930s, the methodological question becomes: how long is long in contemplating the 1960s? For reasons that will become clear, this study begins rather biddably in 1955 with a discussion of civil rights and ends in 1973 with a discussion of what amounted to uncivil wrongs.

Chapter One, “Tranquility in Turmoil,” discusses the 1950s as a tumultuous decade in its own right. Chapter Two, “From New Frontier to Great Society,”

deals with the so-called “good” Sixties: the early part of the decade, stereotypically full of hope and optimism. Chapter Three, “The Cold War,” treats competition with the Soviets. Chapter Four, “The Civil Rights Movement,” details the struggle for black equality, while Chapter Five, “Student Rebellion,” describes campus unrest and the rise of the New Left. Chapter Six, “The Vietnam Quagmire,” summarizes the nation’s military involvement in Southeast Asia. Chapter Seven, “Sex, Gender, and the New Feminism,” covers “women’s lib,” as it was sometimes derogatorily called, and the politics of sexuality and gender. Chapter Eight, “Revolutions Left and Right,” treats not only left-wing radicalism but also right-wing activism as a reaction to it. Against the twin backdrops of the space race and the back-to-earth movement, Chapter Nine—“Small Steps, Giant Leaps, New Concerns”—discusses science, technology, and the environment. Chapter Ten, “Minority Empowerment,” deals with Black Power, the corollary movements that paralleled and spun out of the civil rights movement, and the rise of so-called identity politics. Chapter Eleven, “Sucking in the Seventies, or That ’70s Chapter” (respectively the title of a 1981 Rolling Stones album and an allusion to *That ’70s Show*, a popular sitcom that aired 1998–2006), describes aftershocks, culminating with the Watergate scandal and the American withdrawal from Vietnam. Chapter Twelve, “Legacies,” focuses on memories and interpretations, particularly the notion of “the unfinished Sixties,” which helps to explain not only *that* the decade is debated half a century later but also *why* it is debated, an absorbing question related in part to the powerful ways it continues to define American life.

The 1960s were long in another sense as well. The events that unfolded were often discordant and violent, but even more jarring was the breakneck pace at which they unfolded. In the span of just six days in October 1967, for example, seven Ku Klux Klan members were convicted of conspiracy in the 1964 murders of three civil rights workers in Mississippi; upwards of 30,000 anti-war protesters marched on the Pentagon, with more than six hundred people arrested after they attempted to storm the building; and the federal government eliminated draft deferments for those who burned draft cards or interfered with military recruitment for the war. Or consider that several hundred Vietnamese civilians were massacred at the village of My Lai on March 16, 1968—which was the same day that Robert Kennedy announced his candidacy for president of the United States. Ten weeks later on June 3, Andy Warhol was shot at his New York studio, “The Factory,” and two days after that Robert Kennedy was shot to death in Los Angeles. Major occurrences were happening suddenly in rapid succession, and those

you're goin' all the way." Such advice remains salient, offering guidance for anyone who would study this helter-skelter decade.

To maintain historical accuracy, I have used the term "Negroes" to refer to African Americans before 1966, when the term "Blacks" began to gain favor.

Acknowledgments

A number of people had a hand in making *The Long Sixties* happen, beginning with Peter Coveney, executive editor in history at Wiley-Blackwell. The story of how he contacted me about writing a book on the 1960s (believe it or not) and how I coyly declined is barely plausible, but Peter coaxed, enticed, inveigled, and otherwise cajoled me to write it, eventually convincing me that the world might benefit from one more book about the 1960s. Without Peter there would be no *Long Sixties*, and I'm so glad I trusted him.

After I "completed" the manuscript, Wiley-Blackwell's senior editor in history, Andrew Davidson, took what I naively thought was a final draft and gave it a developmental edit that made it into exactly that, with changes big and small over seven months of revisions. At times Andrew felt like the world's toughest critic but mostly he felt like a co-author, and his sure guidance made the book much stronger than it would have been otherwise. I owe him a huge thank you.

Other people at Wiley-Blackwell played key roles, too. Julia Kirk, the project editor, handled all of the moving parts, while Galen Smith Young, Victoria White, and Maddie Koufogazos all provided editorial assistance and administrative help. Kitty Bocking suggested photos and tracked down permissions. Wiley also marshaled a small army of people unknown to me, including a commissioned survey of college professors teaching courses on the 1960s to assess their wants and needs in the classroom; five reviewers to offer suggestions (anonymously) on the original book proposal; and two reviewers who provided feedback (again anonymously) on the completed manuscript. You know who you are (even if I don't) and I appreciate your input.

A number of people at Florida Atlantic University deserve thanks. Two research assistants provided invaluable help early on in this project: Megan

Allore Bishop and Sandra Lazo de la Vega outlined, fact-checked, suggested topics and photos for inclusion, and more than earned their pay (which came from a generous award from FAU's Division of Sponsored Research, to whom I also owe a big thanks). My colleagues at FAU have listened to my observances and offered their own. A special thanks to Chris Ely, Michael Harrawood, Kevin Lanning, Tim Steigenga, Mark Tunick, and Dan White for their insights.

I'd like to thank the staff at the Florida Atlantic University Library in Jupiter, where Diane Arrieta, Marilee Brown, and Will Howerton, among others, helped me access the information I needed. As with other major research projects I have undertaken, they have made my job much easier. They are the best.

Much love and thanks to my parents, Dan and Jean Strain, who made it through the 1960s relatively unscathed, and to my daughter, Lily, and wife, Melanie. To complete this book I stole time from Lily and also Melanie, who more than anyone else argued and debated with me about the ideas herein, sharpening my thinking in the process. Knowing I had a lot to say about the 1960s, Melanie encouraged me to undertake the project and she was my greatest supporter throughout. She also made it fun.

As the saying goes, if you remember the 1960s, you weren't really there; but, to the friends, family, neighbors, and co-workers who shared their Sixties stories with me, I am grateful.

C.B.S.
Jupiter, FL
September 2015

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The Fifties: Tranquility in Turmoil

Even today Americans tend to remember the 1950s as a placid, antiseptic decade—a rather boring time of suburban puttering, backyard barbecues, and plastic smiles. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, most of what we associate with the 1960s—the struggle with the Soviets, war in Southeast Asia, television, youth culture, drug culture, rock and roll, the civil rights movement, space travel and exploration, even the anti-nuke movement—had its roots in the previous decade. Worthy of study in their own right, not simply as a prelude to the 1960s, the 1950s is one of the most dynamic decades in US history—a puzzling, paradoxical period of swift transformation, swathed in conformity and consensus.

How the 1950s garnered a reputation for sterility relates mainly to television, a new medium that rose to the fore of American culture and consciousness. Television expanded rapidly between the end of World War II and the end of the Korean War. Americans bought an average of 250,000 television sets per month between 1949 and 1952, and millions more saved their money to buy the magic box, a device that transformed the nation as no invention had done since the automobile. Purchasing a TV was a major event for any family, many of whom had scrimped and saved until the proud day that neighbors gathered to watch delivery and installation of the new “TV” by the local retailer. Television had instant appeal, bringing inexpensive, convenient, and passive entertainment right into the home for the enjoyment of the entire family. Critics worried that it leveled high culture and dulled taste, an opiate of the masses.

Sales of new sets averaged in excess of 5 million per year in the 1950s and in some years reached the 7.5-million mark; by the early 1960s, 90 percent



Figure 1.1 A family watching television in 1958 (Source: © Courtesy National Archives, photo no. 306-PS-58-9015).

of all American homes had at least one TV. The invention of coaxial cable and videotape in 1951 and 1956, respectively, further improved the device, which, by projecting the same formulaic programming into homes across the nation, encouraged homogeneity of interests, tastes, and opinions. In just over a decade, television had not only nationalized cultural expression and shared experience in new ways but also democratized news and entertainment—becoming an essential piece of electronics owned by rich and poor, urban and rural, white and black, illiterate and intellectual. Through advertisements, it also fed the growing appetite for consumer consumption. As historian J. Ronald Oakley has observed, no other invention—motion pictures, cars, or radio—brought so much change to so many people in so short a time.

The images television projected were happily reassuring. On westerns such as *Gunsmoke*, *The Rifleman*, *Wagon Train*, and *The Lone Ranger*, justice always prevailed; the good guys enforced law and order with cold steel and hammer fists; talented sleuths on *Dragnet* and *Perry Mason* always solved the crime du jour. Comic relief was furnished by shows starring

famous comedians of the day, *You Bet Your Life* with Groucho Marx, the self-titled *The Jackie Gleason Show*, and shows featuring Milton Berle and Steve Allen. Dinah Shore and Donna Reed—multitalented actresses who hosted eponymous variety shows—and Lucille Ball, whose handsome Cuban-born co-star and real-life husband Desi Arnaz joined her on the #1 hit *I Love Lucy*, provided strong but non-threatening female role models. Clean-cut, white teenagers danced on *American Bandstand*, a local Philadelphia television program, which grew from its 1952 debut into a nationally broadcast show by 1957. Quiz shows like *The \$64,000 Question* and *What's My Line?* tempted viewers with quick riches, and variety shows like *The Ed Sullivan Show* offered a kaleidoscopic array of entertainers and musicians. Programming was generally entertaining, soothing, and—due to careful producing and censorship—safe.

Most importantly, situation comedies (or “sitcoms”) such as *Leave it to Beaver*, *The Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet*, and *Father Knows Best* idealized the new suburban life, purveying a gee-whiz world of narcotic consumerism and suburban euphoria. Dads ruled their households sternly but benevolently; moms catered to the needs of their husbands and children. Pot roasts browned in convection ovens; children played on cul-de-sacs. Whatever problems arose, usually small ones, were resolved in a 30-minute format. So closely did “Ozzie & Harriet” mirror its cast’s lives—with real-life husband Ozzie, wife Harriet, and sons David and Ricky portraying themselves, with Ricky crooning his own songs and Ozzie editing them into early music videos—that the show’s “adventures” were more prototype reality show than sitcom (the house shown in exterior shots on the show was the family’s actual house in the Hollywood Hills). Theodore “the Beaver” Cleaver and his brother Wally got themselves into some real pickles on *Leave it to Beaver*—mostly due to the instigation of their rascal friend Eddie Haskell—but Ward and June Cleaver were always ready to guide their sons back onto the right path. By the conclusion of each episode, all was forgiven. It was the golden age of television and television projected a golden age: 1950s America, TV-style, was pleasant, saccharine, even bland, but almost always comforting.

And why not? In the wake of the biggest challenges the nation had ever faced, the Great Depression and World War II, times were good in America. Unprecedented military spending during the war—close to \$300 billion—had brought a massive stimulus to industrial and agricultural production, ushering in a new era of economic expansion and prosperity. By the mid-1950s, the United States—with 6 percent of the world’s population and

7 percent of its landmass—was producing almost half of the world's manufactured products. It contained within its borders most of the world's cars and telephones, and a sizable portion of its televisions and radios (and, not surprisingly, consumed almost half of the world's annual energy production). Over the course of the 1950s, the Gross National Product (GNP) rose from \$285 billion to \$500 billion, per capita income rose by 48 percent, the median family income rose from \$3083 to \$5657, real wages rose by almost 30 percent, and the number of millionaires rose from roughly 27,000 to almost 80,000. The expanding economy created jobs in record numbers; by 1960, the number of working Americans had risen to a record 66.5 million.

Young couples who had delayed marriage during wartime now got married and had children in record numbers, and at younger ages. By 1953, almost one-third of married American women had "tied the knot" by age nineteen; by 1960, almost 75 percent of all women aged 20–24 were married. And in the 1950s couples tended to stay married, as divorce remained a social stigma, a badge of personal and even moral failure. Those who were married had kids—lots of them. From 1946 to 1950, an average in excess of 3.6 million children were born each year (in 1940 the number had stood at 2.6 million), and from 1950 on there was a steady rise past 4 million in 1954 to an all-time high of 4.3 million in 1957, an average of one newborn every seven seconds. It was, as everyone recognized, a baby boom, one fed by prosperity. Naturally, the boom in babies fed the nation's increasingly growing and powerful economy, as sales of maternity clothing, baby furniture, diapers, baby food, formula, clothing, toys, trikes, bikes, washing machines, clothes dryers, and televisions spiked, so did new school construction. Dr. Benjamin Spock's bestselling *Book of Baby and Child Care*, which sold a million copies per year in the 1950s, offered an informal, commonsense approach to caring for this surge of children, one that emphasized love and positivity rather than discipline and punishment. The advice was well tolerated and much appreciated: after all, the 76.4 million children born between 1946 and 1964 became the single largest generation in the nation's history, the generation that largely came of age in the 1960s.

Much of the postwar growth occurred in previously undeveloped hinterlands, neither urban nor rural; in fact, 83 percent of the total population growth occurred in so-called "suburbs," a new feature of the American landscape. A severe housing shortage had developed after World War II and developers met the crisis with ingenious new solutions—and did so quickly.



Figure 1.2 The ideal 1950s housewife: working, smiling, and pleasing (Source: © George Marks/Retrofile/Getty Images).

Between 1947 and 1951, the construction company Levitt & Sons built the first suburban development in history at Hempstead, New York, where crews followed a precise, 27-step process using prefabricated materials to produce new single-family homes, more than 30 per day at the peak of production. As Henry Ford had done to the automobile industry, the Levitts brought assembly-line production to housing: bulldozing the land and covering it with standardized units with uniform floor plans. Cost-cutting techniques meant that the American dream of owning one's own home had suddenly become much more affordable. Other so-called "Levittowns" followed, changing the American landscape in their sprawl, as middle-class, and mostly white families moved out of the nation's cities and into the new "collar" or "bedroom" communities, with many of the men of the family commuting to their jobs in the city each morning and back home again come five o'clock. One and a half million New Yorkers moved to the city's

surrounding suburbs in the 1950s; right outside Los Angeles, Orange County more than tripled in population. With the suburbs came shopping centers and supermarkets, offering a cornucopia of consumer items and foods. By mid-decade there were more than 1800 shopping centers in the United States (with hundreds more being planned and built); by 1953 there were more than 17,000 supermarkets, which constituted only 4 percent of all grocery stores but accounted for 44 percent of all food sales.

The uniform building codes, the rules and regulations of homeowner associations, and the common background of suburban residents (white, middle-class) reinforced conformity and stimulated low-grade competition for consumer fulfillment, what critics would come to describe as “keeping up with the Joneses.” The people of suburbia tended to buy similar houses, similar cars, and similar toys for their kids. Constrained not only by pressures to purchase contentment but also by traditional gender roles, the experiences of women were especially constant and unvarying. Expected to shop, cook, clean, and serve their husbands, and with few opportunities for fulfillment beyond housework, women had a limited lot in life. Magazines and books carried stories of happy housewives and few women publicly complained, though many presumably suffered in quiet despair.

As the film *Pleasantville* (1998) would later remind moviegoers, it was the last monochrome decade, gray-rinsed and neutral. The Fifties were captured in black-and-white by television and still photography; the Sixties, in contrast, were caught in living color on videotape and film. On December 20, 1964, the three television networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—simultaneously broadcast in color for the first time, and color programming became the norm. Not surprisingly, as journalist-historian David Halberstam has observed, the pace of the Fifties in retrospect “seemed slower, almost languid.” On the other side of the Sixties, looking back from the Seventies, the Fifties seemed even more idyllic. The name of that iconic 1970s show, *Happy Days*, said it all: in the nation’s collective memory, the 1950s were a simpler, easier, and happier time.

But television is not real life—even when it purports to be reality—and just beneath the idealized world reflected on the nation’s TV sets lay a nation in ferment: a golden age of apprehension. The overwhelming sense of uneasiness, the conflicts within and beyond the borders of American society, and the splinters of dissent that sometimes worked their way to the surface all belied the era’s apparent tranquility, and it proved difficult to act as if nothing were awry. Black teenagers wanting to participate on *American Bandstand*, for example, found themselves excluded from the

dance crew and studio audience. By the end of the decade, even teen idol Ricky Nelson chafed against his father's authoritarianism, as Ozzie kept his son from appearing on other shows that would have boosted his stardom. Lucy and Desi Arnaz got a real-life divorce in 1960.

Much of the apprehension and conflict of the 1950s can be traced to the nation's post-World War II rivalry with the Soviet Union, which left its imprint not only on foreign affairs but also on domestic life. Perhaps it was inevitable that the two most powerful nations still standing after World War II would emerge as competitors. But the Cold War—not a “hot war” of military fighting but an undeclared conflict characterized by spying, hostile propaganda, sabotage, and economic embargo—became the longest protracted confrontation in US history, lasting four decades and coloring life in the United States more than anything else since the Civil War a century earlier. Covert espionage was the order of the day as the two nations jockeyed for power—in effect battling for world supremacy.

Each side mistrusted the other and misconstrued the other's motives; each side also assumed its own righteousness and the other's evilness. Overestimating Soviet power, the United States saw the Soviet Union as a cancer, spreading communism over the globe and threatening the American way of life; Russia, gravely wounded by the Germans in World War II, became increasingly paranoid in its dealings with the West, while obsessively pursuing its own security. Twice in the twentieth century, German troops had invaded Russia via Poland, which Soviet premier Joseph Stalin recognized as a crucial buffer between Europe and the Soviet Union; he accordingly labored to bring Eastern Europe within the Soviet sphere of influence. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill noted in a speech at Fulton, Missouri, in March 1946, “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent.” The metaphor of the iron curtain—used to describe the political, military, and ideological barrier erected by the Soviet Union to seal itself and its dependent eastern European allies off from open contact with the West and other noncommunist areas—stuck.

President Harry S. Truman, the nation's first post-WWII president, adopted a policy of “containment” against the Soviet Union and the potential spread of communism. The term, first articulated by leading State Department official George Kennan, emphasized the inevitability of US conflict with the Soviet Union, as different nations with different interests and different economic systems. Truman liked the toughness of Kennan's approach to contain Russian efforts to expand communism and

to meet the Soviets forcefully if necessary. In April 1950, President Truman approved the implementation of a secret National Security Council document, NSC-68, which called for a massive buildup in American military power, in conventional armament as well as atomic weaponry, to guarantee superiority over the Soviets. NSC-68 mapped out the US role in the Cold War by rearticulating the nation's role as global policeman and by channeling more of the nation's gross domestic product toward military use (defense spending increased from 5 to 14.2 percent under President Truman during the Korean War). Containment and military stockpiling became the cornerstones of American foreign policy.

Whatever its causes and merits, fear of the Soviets and of communism led to a staggering American military buildup, the formation of military alliances with democratic *and* dictatorial nations across the globe, US intervention in the sovereign affairs of dozens of countries, and protracted military conflicts in Korea and Vietnam. Most immediately, when North Korean soldiers crossed the 38th Parallel into South Korea in 1950, the United States called for a United Nations sanction against the invasion; the UN declared communist North Korea the aggressor and sent troops, mostly from the United States, to aid the South Korean army. Calling for a "police action," President Truman never asked Congress to pass an official declaration of war (thereby establishing a precedent for President Lyndon Johnson, who later would commit troops to the Vietnam War without ever seeking a congressional mandate for his action). Popular WWII hero General Douglas MacArthur commanded the UN troops, sometimes disagreeing vehemently with his commander-in-chief. The tide turned against North Korea with an amphibious assault at Inchon, where the North Koreans retreated; but reinforcements from the People's Republic of China soon allowed them to regain lost territory. At the same time, and in keeping with the goal of containment, the United States began stepping up its military assistance to South Vietnam by supplying arms and instruction in their use against communist forces in North Vietnam.

Inconclusive and costly, the Korean War dragged on, lasting much longer than anyone had anticipated. In 1953, with neither side having a prospect of victory, a truce was signed. The ceasefire satisfied no one—not the United Nations, not the United States, not South Korea or North Korea—and the Korean peninsula remained tensely divided along more or less the same line. In addition to substantial losses in men and material—54,200 of 1.8 million American servicemen in Korea were killed and 103,300 wounded, with 8200 classified as missing in action—the war had significant