

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Book Notes: Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

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### Years of Horrors *1968 and 2020*

Typically, in **Book Notes**, we discuss a *book* – go figure! – but in this edition I want to discuss a particularly cogent journal article: James Fallows’ “Is This the Worst Year in Modern American History?” which appeared in the electronic version of **The Atlantic** on May 31. It can be found [here](#).

Nationally renowned journalists James and Deborah Fallows have been frequent visitors to Erie, Pennsylvania, delivered presentations at the **Jefferson Educational Society**, received the 2018 *Thomas B. Hagen Dignitas Award* for their work on **Our Towns**, in which they favorably discussed Erie’s attempts at re-invention, and have been advocates for our town and region.



But that’s not what makes “*Is This the Worst Year in Modern American History*” an important and valuable read. It’s Fallows comparison of 1968 to 2020, two years that I have elsewhere called the “Years of Horrors.” [\*] Fallows writes, “The most traumatic year in modern American history was 1968. But what is now the second-most traumatic year, 2020, still has seven months to run. The comparison provides little comfort, and several reasons for concern.”

Concern? Why? Why is 1968 important?

There are at least six intertwined answers:

1. Politics as theater and angry partisanship;
2. Race relations and the beginning of a retreat from the civil rights progress of the 1960s;
3. Gender relations as the women's movement morphed into women's liberation;
4. The counter-culture, in particular the combination of the sexual revolution and the ultimate mutating of the "do your own thing" vibe – to use a now quaint sounding expression – into the hyper-individualism and "greed-is-good" of 21st century rightwing politics;
5. Music, music, music; and
6. Mediated America, in which the nascent cultural fragmentation spurred by TV, rock music, and transistor radios has evolved (devolved?) into a social media free-for-all.

There isn't space in a **Book Notes** to explore the implications of all those factors – not individually and certainly not their collective impact. But the comparison to 2020 sheds light on our current travail. In particular, perhaps now best symbolized by an apostate seeking to score political points standing outside a church he did not enter, holding a Bible he probably has not read, the so-called culture wars had their spasmodic birth in 1968. Over the past 50 years from that birth, they've grown into the socially defining issue.

The "culture war" issues now threatening to boil over were not conceived in 1968. Many of them have roots deep in American history. 1968, however, marks a cusp year. Issues that had been suppressed by the triple-threat of the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War, not to mention post-WWII's hitherto unparalleled prosperity burst back onto the scene. Now, a half-century later, 1968's infant culture wars have fully matured, threatening to unravel the weave of American culture, fraying, and then scattering its stories into tattered fragments.

Providing keen observations about each, Fallows does an excellent job comparing and contrasting 1968 and 2020; from the Hong Kong Flu to COVID-19; from culture wars just budding to fully blossomed; from a booming economy to one in free-fall; from the war in Vietnam (in which 16,899 Americans died in 1968, or almost 50 per day) to token but still deadly wars in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Middle East; from a military draft looming over every 18 to 22 year-olds' every decision to no draft at all; from Civil Rights to Black Lives Matter; from Media, Media, Media to the Internet and Social Media food fights; from leadership to its absence.

Three of Fallows' insights merit our serious attention. For, just as is 2020, 1968 was a presidential election year. The election began all about the War in Vietnam, but it ended on the theme of "*law and order*" and a thinly veiled appeal to racism. As 2020 now threatens to become, 1968 was a year of urban riots and civil insurrections.

George Wallace, Alabama's segregationist governor, running as a third-party candidate on the American Party ticket, took his overtly racist "*Law and order*" ("when the looting starts, the shooting starts") national. Astounded by his favorable reception, Wallace was reported to say, "My God, they're all southerners!" Wallace's support peaked at about 22 percent of the electorate in late-September and early-October.

Richard Nixon refused to "*out-Wallace*" Wallace, choosing to play a subtler and more effective game. Nixon combined an emphasis on a leader's responsibility to protect all citizens through vigorous law enforcement and with what came to be known as the "Southern Strategy." In his "Southern Strategy," Nixon allied himself with Strom Thurmond's Dixiecrat sympathizers promising "to go slow" on Civil Rights, supporting states' rights and using race as a wedge issue to break the previously Democratically solid South.

It worked. Nixon won the election, defeating Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey 44 percent to 43 percent. The razor thin margin of victory, however, was an optical illusion. For George Wallace got 11 percent of the votes; conventional wisdom, which is frequently that – only conventional, but in this instance correct – suggests that all or most of Wallace's support, in his absence, would have gone to Nixon. Without getting into the minutiae of electoral arithmetic, it is clear that "law and order" rhetoric as a proxy for racism carried the day.

The lessons for 2020? Fallows offers several, but three lessons strike me as prescient. One of the differences between 1968 and 2020 is that, so far, we have not experienced a political assassination. There were six in the 1960s; one could almost call it the "age of assassination." In 1968, there were two horrific murders, first that of Martin Luther King Jr. and then Robert F. Kennedy. In his most wistful paragraph, Fallows briefly meditates on the "*What if?*" of Martin Luther King Jr.'s. and Robert F. Kennedy's assassinations.

What if King and Kennedy had lived? What if Kennedy had captured the Democratic nomination, as many expected? As Fallows says, "there would have been no Nixon presidency, and no further five-plus years of war in Vietnam, and no four Nixon appointees to the Supreme Court." Ah, if only.

Counter-factual historical musings drive professional historians crazy, but as John Lewis Gaddis writes in *The Landscape of History*, thinking counterfactually can

shed new light on old problems. How? In this instance, by underscoring the importance of leadership. As we shall see, populist frothings aside, leadership is vital; no, it is everything. And its importance is never more conspicuous than when it is absent.

Fallows' second insight is that the current domestic upheavals are an electoral gift to President Trump. Reeling from his mishandling of the coronavirus pandemic, with an electorate increasingly disaffected at his bloviating buffoonery and mean-spiritedness, Trump's re-election chances appeared to be in jeopardy. But, just as in 1968, when a political has-been named Richard Nixon rode a wave of anger and fatigue over social disruption to the White House, in 2020 rioting in the streets may become a decisive issue.

As one who has held leadership positions, as one who teaches and speaks on leadership, I found Fallows' third point extremely important. Maybe because I have made the same point myself on numerous occasions, and it is always pleasing to have one's ideas, if not validated, at least agreed with, Fallows' observation that 1968's leaders were *competent* exposes our current plague of *incompetent* national leadership.

If I understand Fallows correctly, by *competent* he means two things. Both are critical, but the second might prove in 2020 to be existentially crucial.

Peter Drucker famously remarked, "managers know how to do things right; leaders know how to do the right things." With Drucker in mind, Fallows argues that regardless of whether you agreed or disagreed with any of their ideological positions or policies, Lyndon Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, Richard Nixon, Nelson Rockefeller, Ronald Reagan, and even George Wallace knew how to run things.

They were *managerially* competent – they knew how to do "things," they knew how to get "things" done. While multiple states, such as Ohio and its Republican governor and New York and its Democratic governor, and we, in Erie, have been fortunate to have quality local leadership during our time of coronavirus and domestic upheaval, as the events of the past three months illustrate with painful clarity, at the national level that vital leadership skill is missing-in-action.

Leadership – never more valued than when conspicuous by its absence.

But what about doing "the right things?" Fallows' other aspect of *competence* speaks to leaders understanding their role and its obligations, understanding, and respecting the system. Regarding "role," every president has understood the need to be the "face of the nation," to be a uniter not a divider, to be the leader of everyone. Even Richard Nixon paid token respect to that requirement by, as Fallows says, his theme of "bringing us together."

Lyndon Johnson resigned the presidency for two reasons: 1) he feared electoral defeat and 2) as he said in his resignation speech on March 31 that so shocked the nation, paraphrasing, he needed to dedicate all of his energy not to politics but to running the country during these difficult times. Was he sincere? It's been debated, but what isn't debatable is that he never reneged, even when the faintest prospect of a draft at the 1968 Democratic convention briefly flickered.

Similarly, Richard Nixon, again, who I still find myself surprised at for defending, in the end, respected the system. Although he committed the grossest crime in American electoral history in the Chenault Affair and "gamed" the system during his administration, he, ironically, respected the rules of the game he violated. For, when it became apparent that he had lost, rather than attempt to blow up the system, he folded his hand and resigned.

What do I mean by "system?" People on both the far-right and far-left may well, for different reasons, bristle at that term, but the "system" is what holds the entire enterprise together. The "system," in its boldest relief, is the "rule of law" and the Constitutional "system" of checks and balances that make American government work.

Does it always work perfectly? No. Is it always just? No. But then nothing is "always just" and "always perfect." Representative democracy, as I believe Winston Churchill said, "is the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."

Can one say with confidence that the current national leadership respects the system; that the current national leadership knows the "right thing to do," by which "right" means moral? That the question is even asked underscores the current moral and political peril.

For example, in all of American history I cannot think of an example of a sitting president of whom it was asked "If he loses, will he relinquish the office?" Andrew Jackson, while not a sitting president, when he lost the highly contentious 1824 election, conceded; Samuel Tilden did the same in 1876. So, too, did Al Gore in 2000.

The most famous example might be the very first. Observers wondered whether George Washington would actually turn the government over to John Adams. When he did in one of the first peaceful governmental transitions in western history, Europeans marveled. Yet, in 2020, the once unthinkable question is now asked: "If Trump loses, will he obey the law?"

Fallows' "*Is This the Worst Year in Modern American History?*" is worth the read. His comparison of the "Years of Horrors" events bring new light to current events. More importantly, his analysis of the impact of civil unrest on the presidential election of 1968 underscores the rapidly changing incoherence of 2020's politics and presidential contest.

Another thing Fallows' insightful article does is inadvertently shine a light on the absence of a quality, book length study of 1968's critical impact upon American culture. Since these brief essays are called **Book Notes** here are a few comments on the literature surrounding 1968.

The best work has been done on the presidential election of 1968. The bellwether for all subsequent work is Theodore White's ***The Making of the President 1968***. Lawrence O'Donnell's ***Playing With Fire*** brings White up-to-date. Also of interest, and the most succinct of the lot, is Lewis L. Gould's ***1968: The Election That Changed America***. Joe McGinniss' ***The Selling of the President 1968*** details the devolution of political campaigning into a variation of consumer package good advertising.

Todd Gitlin's ***Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*** tells the tale of the era's political protests from the vantage point of an insider – Gitlin is a former president of the Students for a Democratic Society. It also suffers from that insider's lack of perspective. Cottrell and Browne's ***1968: The Rise and Fall of the New American Revolution*** reads like a textbook, with all the excitement that suggests, but it is packed with information. Cottrell's ***Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll: The Rise of 1960s Counterculture*** has the same merits and demerits.

The best one-volume attempt at a comprehensive look at 1968 is Charles Kaiser's ***1968 in America: Music, Politics, Chaos, Counterculture and the Shaping of a Generation***, but it was published in 1988 and has been outstripped by the pace of intervening events. Although not exactly about 1968, two works that explore in both depth and keen insight its fallout and lasting impact on American society are Bruce Cannon Gibney's ***Generation of Sociopaths*** (subject of a previous **Book Notes** that can be found [here](#)) and Andrew Hartman's ***A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars***, which is now in its second edition. Like Cottrell's books, ***A War for the Soul of America*** reads somewhat like a textbook, but is saved by the grace of Hartman's writing and the quality of his analysis.

Well, that's a very short bibliography of books focusing on 1968. For a very readable and insightful look at that painful year and its implications for today, I again recommend James Fallows' "*Is This the Worst Year in Modern American History?*" Let us hope past is not prologue.

That bibliography, by the way, suggests to me a project for the next 6-12 months, which is to transform “***America in 1968: The Far Side of the Moon and the Birth of the Culture Wars***” into a book-length manuscript. Hmm, we shall see if, as Jefferson Vice President Ben Speggen always quotes me, I flunk retirement yet again.

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[\*] The two years I called “***Years of Horrors***” are discussed in a live-streamed discussion with Ben Speggen on June 2 (which can be found [here](#)).

