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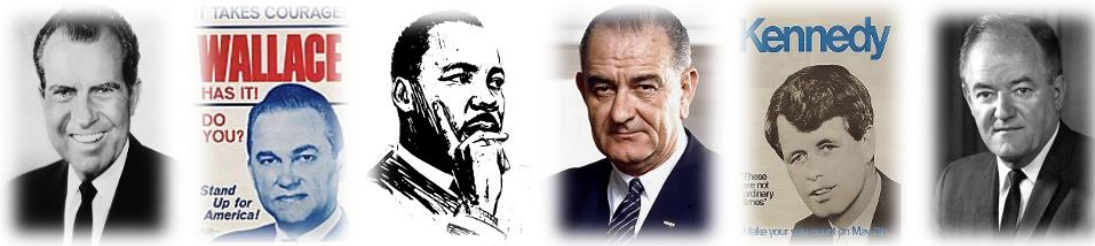
Book Notes #104

June 2022

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1968/2022: The Seeds of Our Discontents
(Part Three)
Race in America





As it happens, I am finishing this most recent installment of “The Seeds of Our Discontents” on *Juneteenth*, the old African American holiday newly minted as a federal holiday only last year. (For a detailed discussion of *Juneteenth* see **Book Notes #62** which can be found [here](#)). *Juneteenth* celebrates the end of slavery in the United States and the day, June 19, 1865, when Union Army General Gordon Granger proclaimed the freedom of the enslaved people in Texas. Celebrated widely in the African American community, the holiday is also known as Jubilee Day, Emancipation Day, Freedom Day, and Black Independence Day. That I am writing this on *Juneteenth* seems more than appropriate, for this week we examine “Race in America,” which might be *the* defining issue in American history.

Defining issue? How so?

Well, briefly recapping, in “The Seeds of Our Discontents” we’ve been exploring the contest between two meta-threads in *The American Tapestry*, two meta-stories in the American Story whose intertwined competition might, in fact, be *the* story of America. One story is an exclusionary story, a story that says those values Americans cherish – liberty, equality, and opportunity – are reserved for only a small subset of Americans; the other, a protean story of ongoing change and growth that says those values are open to all as Americans ever increase the meaning of the “We” in “We the People ...”

Common to both of these stories are two threads essential to *The American Tapestry Project*: “American Freedom” and “Freedom’s Faultlines: Tales of Race and Gender.” “American Freedom” speaks about those truths Americans assert are self-evident – equality, liberty, and opportunity, for what else can the “pursuit of happiness” mean but the opportunity to be all one can be. “Freedom’s Faultlines” explores all those times Americans failed to be true to those values we claim to be self-evident. How? By excluding some from this grand promise. Then those excluded struggling for inclusion by appealing to those very values by exhorting America “to just be true to what you said on paper.”

More pointedly, we’ve been exploring how that struggle burst into flames during the 1960s, both literally with cities afire and figuratively by giving birth to the culture wars. And how the light from those fires exposed the roots of issues going

far back in American history and shone forward to issues scarring American society in 2022. This week and next week we'll explore just what happened in the 1960s that shaped American society in 2022 by challenging America to be, as Martin Luther King, Jr. implored, 'true to what it said on paper.' Next week we'll examine the women's movement morphing into women's liberation in 1968 and the birth of the gay rights movement at 1969's Stonewall Uprising.

This week, however, it's America's defining issue – "Race In America." I will concede that the defining issue in American history is freedom's story, but the defining plotline in that story is race, for from whatever date you want to say that story began, who was free and who was not was defined by race. Race, you'll discover, is a fluid thing. It might surprise many a European immigrant's descendants to learn that for a time their ancestors were not considered "white," a category reserved for British and northern European settlers. All others were suspect; I am old enough to remember the last faint vestiges of anti-immigrant sentiment challenging the "whiteness" of Italian Americans. It is also true that in the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries, indentured servants of any hue howsoever pale were technically unfree, but only for the term of their indenture. Not so enslaved Americans of African descent and Native Americans, the latter of whom did not gain citizenship rights until the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924. African Americans had to wait another 40 years until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 struck down Jim Crow before they became full members in the American experiment.

And even then, there was work still to be done.

It's simply not possible in anything approaching a **Note** to tell the story of the African American experience from the arrival of the first slaves in Jamestown in 1619 through the colonial era, slavery's expansion, the Boston Massacre in which the first victim of America's quest for independence was a free Black man named Crispus Attucks, the Revolutionary War, the original Constitution's tacit acknowledgment of slavery without ever mentioning the word, the Founder's hope for slavery's withering away thwarted by Eli Whitney's cotton gin, the tortured 41 years between the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and the Civil War's outbreak in 1861, the Emancipation Declaration of 1863, 1865's 13th Amendment abolishing slavery, the failed Civil Rights Act of 1866, the other post-Civil War Amendments that re-invented America, Reconstruction and its undoing by southern Redemptionists preaching the Lost Cause, a hundred years of Jim Crow, lynching, the heroism of Ida B. Wells fighting lynching, the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement in the late-19th, early-20th centuries and the founding of the NAACP in 1909 following the 1908 race riot in Springfield, Illinois, that Movement's slow steady pace through the early- to mid-20th century until **Brown v. Board of Education** in 1954 overturned "separate but equal," the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1956 leading to the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and other

civil rights organizations, the Freedom Rides and 1963's March on Washington leading to the three great Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s: the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

That epic story bursts the bounds of any **Note**. But for a moment in the mid-1960s, despite cities aflame, the violence of southern racists murdering little girls at Sunday School, the murder of civil rights workers during 1964's Mississippi Freedom Summer, and other desecrations too numerous to list, for a moment it looked like America was on the path to begin atoning for and beginning to heal America's original sin of slavery.

Although it is sometimes argued who actually first said slavery was America's original sin, it was none other than Founding Father and fourth President of the United States James Madison. Madison made the assertion in a letter to the Marquis de Lafayette. In discussing the issues emanating from that 1820's Missouri Compromise, Madison said:

The case opens the wider field, as the Constitutions and laws of the different States are at variance in the civic character given to free people of color; those of most of the States, not excepting such as have abolished slavery, imposing various disqualifications which degrade them from the rank & rights of white persons. All of these perplexities develop more & more, the dreadful fruitfulness of the original sin of the African trade. [1]

Regardless, by the mid-1960s, America had made a course correction and was beginning to redress these issues. Then, as we have seen, in that fateful year 1968 the Civil Rights progress of the 1950s and early-1960s was checked and stalled. Several questions immediately arise: What progress had been made and how? How was it checked and stalled? Who "checked and stalled" it?

The civil rights movements – I call them movements because there were more than one ranging from W.E.B. DuBois' founding of the NAACP, Ida B. Wells' continuing fight against lynching then discrimination in Chicago, A. Phillip Randolph and the Pullman Porters demanding just compensation, Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby, President Truman integrating the Army in 1948, Thurgood Marshall and Pauli Murray's legal assault on Jim Crow down to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1950s and 1960s – aided by a southern President finally in the 1960s turned the legal tide and began to find justice for African Americans. Although in the early-1960s, President John F. Kennedy and his Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy began to use the power of the federal government to defend African American rights, it was Texan Lyndon B. Johnson, picking up the martyred Kennedy's mantle, who found the political will and, one might say, political muscle to get a southern-dominated Congress to begin to be true to what the Founders "said on paper." He did this by navigating

through Congress three great pieces of civil rights legislation: the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

Briefly, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which Johnson signed into law on July 2, 1964, “prohibited discrimination in public places, provided for the integration of schools and other public facilities, and made employment discrimination illegal. It was the most sweeping civil rights legislation since Reconstruction.” [2] As the National Archives notes, President Kennedy had called for a civil rights act in June 1963. Johnson made good on Kennedy’s challenge. With the aid of Senators Hubert Humphrey and Everett Dirksen, Johnson and his team overcame an attempt by southern Democrats to kill the bill with a filibuster. Dirksen converted enough Republican senators to the cause to get the compromise bill passed by a vote of 73-27. [3]

The Voting Rights Act of 1965, which Johnson signed into law on August 6, 1965, “outlawed the discriminatory voting practices adopted in many southern states after the Civil War, including literacy tests as a prerequisite to voting.” [4] It meant “to enforce the fifteenth amendment to the Constitution,” which had granted African American males the right to vote, which had been extended to African American women and all women with the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920. The Voting Rights Act of 1965, which “was the most significant statutory change in the relationship between the federal and state governments in the area of voting since Reconstruction” was immediately challenged in the courts by southern states. The contest continued into the 21st century, when in 2013 a conservative Supreme Court “struck down a key provision of the act involving federal oversight of voting in *Shelby County v. Holder*.” [5] [[6]

Passed shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968, the Fair Housing Act of 1968 “prohibited discrimination concerning the sale, rental and financing of housing based on race, religion, national origin, or sex.” [7] It was driven by the spectacle of Black veterans of World War II, the Korean War, and the War in Vietnam encountering difficulty, not to say outright hostility, when attempting to secure a home. Once again, it was Senator Everett Dirksen’s ability to marshal just enough Republican support to break a Senate filibuster by southern Democrats that enabled passage of the bill. [8] A small example of the bill’s necessity can be attested to by any number of white Erieites, who, reading the deeds to their homes in Glenwood and the Frontier area, were shocked to discover archaic and now illegal exclusions prohibiting sale of the property “to colored people, Jews, Italians, and other undesirables.”

Regardless, these three legislative acts are Lyndon Johnson’s great legacy, as he sought to extend inclusion in the American Dream to all Americans. Because of the Vietnam War, those of us of a certain age have always had ambivalent feelings

about President Johnson, but it must be stated that absent the Vietnam War he would rank as one of the great American presidents. Why? Because he believed it was America's duty "to be true to what we said on paper" and extend inclusion into all of America's rights and benefits to all Americans regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, or socio-economic status.

In 2022, a time when bigotry and exclusiveness remain, it must be pointed out that all the great political and moral leaders we extol in our history were champions of extending and increasing that inclusion. Those who opposed it, we excoriate.

Think about that for a while; who today celebrates Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, who opined that a Black man had no rights a white man was obliged to respect, or Sen. Stephen Douglas, who said America was founded by white people for white people, or South Carolina Senator Ben Tillman, who defended lynching and ridiculed Black Americans or – well, it's a long list. I guess, answering my own question, maybe Steve Bannon and others of his ilk.

Who do we admire? George Washington, who invited the Jewish Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island to feel welcome and secure in their new land; Abraham Lincoln, who needs no introduction; Harriet Tubman; Frederick Douglass; Harry Truman; Martin Luther King, Jr., and a reassuringly long list of citizens who believed in the American promise.

Still, all of that 1960s era progress began to stall and today even be reversed during the presidential election of 1968. That election has been covered many, many times – see the **End Notes** to last week's **Book Notes** for a short reading list. All I am going to do to draw this note to a conclusion is summarize the campaign's major drift, which began anti-war abroad and ended anti-war at home.

The election began all about Vietnam. From the Senate Foreign Relations Committee meeting in 1967 that inspired Eugene McCarthy to challenge a sitting president to President Johnson's decision not to run for re-election, the election was all about anti-Vietnam War politics. But when Johnson pulled out, Democrats Sens. Eugene McCarthy and Robert F. "Bobby" Kennedy were left with only each other to run against.

Beginning, however, with the assassination in April 1968 of Martin Luther King, Jr., the ensuing nationwide urban riots, anti-war campus rebellions, most notably at Columbia University, then the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy in June and the riots at the Democratic national convention in August, all occurring within the context of a general rise in crime, the campaign was increasingly less and less about the Vietnam War and more and more about the War at Home. And the

“War at Home” easily became conflated with the cause of Black Americans seeking social justice.

A quick aside about the crime rate during the 1960s, which many opponents of civil rights’ progress wanted to blame on politicians who were soft on crime and lawlessness in the inner cities, a tangled euphemism for blaming rising crime rates on Black Americans. There is no argument – crime rates increased dramatically during the 1960s. While the overall population between 1960 and 1968 grew by 11 percent, the number of serious crimes (murder, rape, assault, and theft) almost doubled (a 98 percent increase), the murder rate increased by 51 percent, the incidence of reported rape increased by 84 percent, assault by 85 percent, and theft by 88 percent. [9] There were a lot of causes driving these numbers; the increasingly pervasive drug culture; social disruptions in families; and even, perhaps, civil disturbances contributed to the rise. But another factor frequently overlooked is the commonly accepted notion among criminologists that the majority of violent crimes are committed by young males between the ages of 15 and 30. [10] Beginning in 1961, as the leading edge of the Baby Boom generation matured, there was a steady increase in 15-year-olds throughout the decade. Please don’t write and tell me I am blaming crime on Baby Boomers, although, in a certain sense, I guess I am. Although parsing the data is beyond the scope of this **Note**, the point is the cause(s) of the rapid increase in crime were more complex and more nuanced than politicians wanted to acknowledge.

One of those politicians who ignored any subtlety in understanding the increase in crime was Alabama Governor George Wallace, who openly exploited it by running on a strict law and order agenda. Wallace’s schtick was a thinly veiled anti-African American campaign.

Maybe not so thinly veiled.

He was the man who declared “Segregation now, Segregation tomorrow, Segregation forever.” In short, Wallace blamed Black Americans and northern liberals for the increasing lawlessness in American society. After a campaign rally in a northern city, he famously remarked “They’re all southerners!”

By which he meant all white people were anti-Black.

By September, Wallace’s polling numbers peaked at 22 percent.

Richard Nixon, to his credit, refused to out-Wallace Wallace. After deciding there were no votes for him in the Black community, Nixon ran a much subtler, much more effective pro law-and-order campaign attacking crime in the streets, campus unrest, and civil insurrection.

He argued that the first duty of government was to protect its citizens and to uphold the laws.

The latter was a key component of his “southern strategy” – by implying he would go slow on civil rights, Nixon sought to woo disaffected white southerners away from the Democrats to his emerging Republican majority. A key convert to Nixon’s cause was South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond, who had bolted the 1948 Democratic Convention when then-Minnesota Senator Hubert Humphrey made a famous speech declaring that the Democratic Party had to rid itself of racists and become the champions of the people. The “bolters,” who technically remained in the Democratic Party, were called “Dixiecrats.” By 1964, Thurmond had become a Republican, which, coupled with Barry Goldwater’s victories in four southern states, signaled the conversion of the Republican Party to the cause of racial exclusion. Thurmond threw his support in 1968 to Nixon, telling Ronald Reagan he had to wait his turn.

Nixon made courting southern votes a key campaign initiative; in doing so, he fractured the formally solidly Democratic south and set in motion the political realignment among the parties I mentioned in last week’s **Book Note**, which can be found [here](#).

Nixon’s success in transforming the Republican Party into reactionary opposition to civil rights progress colored the last 30 years of the 20th century and defines what is quickly approaching the end of the first quarter of the 21st century. The key civil rights insights from the 1968 campaign are Nixon’s conversion of the new Republicans in the South, which led to the beginning of a retreat on civil rights and the lasting legacy of the Wallace campaign, which provides a glimpse of two futures – Pat Buchanan and Donald Trump.

Buchanan is a better educated, more polished Wallace; Donald Trump is a shrewder media master. It might have been Pat Buchanan who declared culture war at the 1992 Republican National Convention, but it is Donald Trump who seized that baton in 2015 and has used it as an exclusionary cudgel to bang his way into the center of American culture and politics. In the process, seeking to undo the civil rights progress of the 20th century, Trump now threatens the very survival of the American experiment in self-government and social inclusiveness.

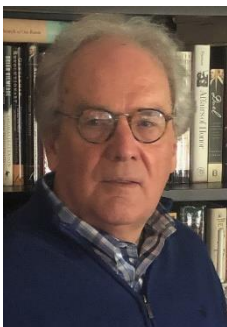
In the end, the presidential campaign that began anti-war concluded as a thinly veiled law and order attack on Black Americans and the lessening of any urgency about civil rights. With the exception of Title IX of the Higher Education Act of 1972 prohibiting gender discrimination in any organization that receives federal funding and the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 there has been no major piece of civil rights legislation in the past 50 years. In fact, as we are seeing with the abortion debate morphing into an attack on contraception, which was made

legal in 1965's *Griswold v. Connecticut*, there have been attempts, both subtle and overt to roll back the great advances of the 1960s, particularly regarding voting rights (cf. *Shelby v. Holder County*).

This all began in 1968.

Which brings us back to race in America and the unsolved riddle of that legacy.

Coda – I could start a debate among readers who are interested in historical theory about whether history is made by people or driven by forces beyond human control. Actually, it's probably both. But in the end, I think it is people who make history by how they react to those forces that may or may not be beyond our control. Which is a clumsy way of getting at something I think about from time-to-time: what might America be like today had Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy not been assassinated in 1968, but had lived to die old men in bed at home? Asking that question drives historians crazy – they call it counterfactual history because there is no way to answer it. You can fill in any script, any story you want. I'm not so sure. We know what they believed in; we know what they championed. I'm not going to get bogged down in the details of might-have-beens. All I'll say is, somewhat wistfully, I am positive that had they lived, today's America would be a better place.



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"Richard Nixon" at **Wikicommons** available [here](#) accessed June 14, 2022.

"George Wallace Poster" at **Wikicommons** available [here](#) accessed June 13, 2022.

"Martin Luther King sketch" at **Wikicommons** available [here](#) accessed June 13, 2022.

"Lyndon Johnson" at **Wikicommons** available [here](#) accessed June 13, 2022.

"Robert F. Kennedy campaign poster" at **Wikicommons** available [here](#) accessed June 13, 2022.

"Hubert Humphrey" at **Wikicommons** available [here](#) accessed June 14, 2022.

End Notes

1. Madison, James. "From James Madison to Lafayette, 25 November 1820" at **The National Archives Founders Online** available [here](#) accessed June 20, 2022.
2. "Civil Rights Act (1964)" at **National Archives** available [here](#) accessed June 20, 2022.
3. Ibid.

4. "Voting Rights Act (1965)" at **National Archives** available [here](#) accessed June 20, 2022.
5. Ibid.
6. "Shelby County v. Holder" in **Oyez** available [here](#) accessed June 20, 2022.
7. "Fair Housing Act", at **History.com** available [here](#) accessed June 20, 2022.
8. Ibid.
9. "United States Crime Rates 1960-2019" at **Disaster Center.com** available [here](#) accessed June 20, 2022.
10. "Law Enforcement and Juvenile Crime" in **Statistical Briefing Book at Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention at U.S. Department of Justice** available [here](#) accessed June 20, 2022.

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