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1968/2022: The Seeds of Our Discontents

(Part Two)

Politics as Theater and Angry Partisanship



American
Tapestry
project

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From left: Richard Nixon in 1968, Nixon and Roger Ailes in 1968, and Ailes in 1968.

Who was Roger Ailes?

What did he do that redefined how American politics was contested?

In [last week's Book Notes](#), we began a multipart series linked to my *The American Tapestry Project*, which in addition to a series of lectures at the Jefferson Educational Society and elsewhere, is a podcast that can be found on WQLN/NPR [here](#), NPR One [here](#), and other podcast sites. This new miniseries of seven or eight *Book Notes* posits that the key element, one might say plotline, in the “American story” is the contest between two meta threads, between two subplots, that drive the overall story of America.

One is an essentialist story that says America is a white, Christian, patriarchal society that limits those truths Americans say are self-evident – liberty, equality, and opportunity – to itself.

The other is an existentialist society, although the term *protean* seems more accurate.

Protean means the ability to adapt, to change shape, to grow and adjust to new circumstances. It means the ability to be versatile, to take on different forms. [1] American society is a protean society which, rooted in and growing out of America's founding society that proclaimed those truths of liberty, equality, and opportunity, seeks to prove that humans are capable of self-government while at the same time increasing the inclusivity of the “*We*” in the “We the people” to include all its people.

The first is an exclusionary society; the latter an inclusionary society. They are not mutually exclusive, but they come perilously close. Their contest defines American politics and American society from the very beginning when the constitutional framers of 1787-1789 sought to erect a republican fence around the democratic spirit unleashed in 1776. It continues today, for our current political and cultural polarization is the latest skirmish in the ongoing contest between those two

competing visions about what America means. Skirmish might not be the most apt word, for today's partisan divide's toxic politics reek more of brawl and clash. Regardless of how described, the fight re-erupted and boiled over in the 1960s, in particular during the presidential election of 1968 when, according to journalist and presidential historian Theodore H. White, "the marvel of American politics previously had been its ability to channel passion into a peaceful choice of directions ..." but "in 1968 hate burst out of the channel." [2]

Hate is a strong word, but it can result from fear and resentment when people think they are losing their culture. And the fear that they are losing their culture animates many – maybe all – of the essentialist story's adherents. And they are not wrong, for in America's dynamic, protean society change is the one constant.

It has been true since the beginning.

Change, change, change – maybe that ought to be the national motto. Americans, while holding fast to their core values of liberty, equality, and opportunity, have been busy people changing almost everything as they worked to build their society. Abandoning homebased industries for small shops then factories; leaving the farm for the city then the city for the suburbs; moving east to west, then south to north and back again; embracing technology from Whitney's cotton gin to Morse's telegraph to Bell's telephone to an ever-accelerating technology of instant communications obliterating distance, Americans have constantly changed their society's everyday character. Benjamin Franklin, one of those who set loose the forces of change in American society, could have easily lived in his great-great-grandparents world; you could not survive a day, a week, a month much less a lifetime in Benjamin Franklin's world.

As wrenching as the forces of technological change have been, the bigger change has been Americans constantly changing, redefining who they were – who they are. American national identity is a fluid, ever-shifting thing as Americans redefine the role of women, African Americans, indigenous people, and a near constant cascade of new Americans emigrating into American society. America is a nation of immigrants. Everyone reading this **Book Note** is descended from someone who came from somewhere else. Some sooner; some later. Some willing; some unwilling, but everyone came from somewhere else.

And when they first arrived, they met a mixed reception ranging from a lukewarm welcome because their labor was needed to outright hostility. In 18th century Philadelphia, it was Franklin's resentment of early German immigrants who clung to their native language. In the mid-19th century, opposing Irish and German Catholics, it was anti-immigrationists of the American Party, who when asked about their party replied "I know nothing" giving rise to the Know-Nothings. In the late-19th and early-20th centuries, it was the Immigration Restriction League opposing Southern and Eastern European immigrants as "the mongrel scum of Europe."

Underlying it all is America's ongoing struggle with its tortured racial history, whether the pre-Civil War abolition movement, the Civil War itself and its 620,000 dead warriors, the post-Civil War southern Redemptionist persecution of the newly freed slaves, the hundred-year history of Jim Crow that finally ended in the 1960s, and the Tea Party's still reverberating shock at the election of the first African American president in 2008. Which when combined with the most recent wave of immigration reshaping American society resulting from the Immigration Act of 1965, brings us to today and Tucker Carlson braying about "replacement theory" as he and his ilk recoil at the changes wrought in American society since the 1960s.

And, it must immediately be noted, that Carlson and those clinging to the essentialist story are not wrong. Although I consider their understanding of the motives driving these changes twisted, the facts are that since the 1960s the composition of American society has radically changed. As recently as 1960, 85 percent of the American population was white of European ancestry; by 2005 that proportion had decreased to 67 percent and by 2050 is projected to be 47 percent. [3] That is, if you are doing the arithmetic, a 44.7 percent decrease in the proportion of Americans who are of white, European ancestry.

Adherents of the protean American story see it as a sign of America's great strength – the ability to continually grow and change and adapt to the opportunities a changing world provides. But adherents of the essentialist American story resent it mightily as they sense their power waning and their world slipping away. Their resentment has only grown since the tipping point of the 1960s and 1968, in particular. Everything shaping 21st century American culture emerged or boiled over in that fractious decade, from media and music saturating every waking hour, to a counterculture celebrating changing sexual mores, libertarianism, and hyper-individualism on both the socio-political right and left, to the women's movement beginning the redefinition of "woman" and women's role in American society, to the civil rights movement's apotheosis in the great civil rights acts of the 1960s redefining freedom for African Americans to politics transforming into fiery theater and angry partisanship – it was the moment that everything became political.

Politics invades all of the above, politics intertwines all the issues just listed, and, since the 1960s, as any cable news junkie can tell you, politics permeates everything, for it was in the 1960s that politics became personal, as Carol Hanisch wrote in her seminal 1970 women's liberation essay "The Personal Is Political." [4] It's politics, politics, politics all the time, as if life itself were a continuous political campaign, a never-ending plebiscite on whatever issue trivial or profound snags the public notice until the next snags it away from Americans' notoriously short attention spans.

And into it all waded Roger Ailes and Richard Nixon, who, if they didn't bring the gasoline to the fire, lit the match.

Since politics permeates everything, to keep this **Note** to something approaching "note" length, I am only going to briefly look at four things resulting from 1968's presidential election that continue to shape American society today and the struggle between America's two competing stories' vision of the American future – politics as theater, party purity, loss of faith in government and the end of the liberal consensus.

Politics as theater and angry partisanship didn't begin in 1968.

It's as old as George Washington buying drinks to seek votes in his first run for the Virginia House of Burgesses. It's as old as Thomas Jefferson unleashing James Callender to expose Alexander Hamilton's affair with Maria Reynolds. It's as old as Benjamin Franklin's grandson Benjamin Franklin Bache tormenting President Washington in the *American Aurora*. It's as old as recasting a southern aristocrat, William Henry Harrison, as a frontier Indian fighter in a log cabin in "*Tippecanoe & Tyler, Too*." It's as old as Teddy Roosevelt and his Roughriders going up San Juan Hill in Teddy's Abercrombie & Fitch safari outfit. It's as old as FDR's million-dollar smile and calming fireside chats. It's as old as the John F. Kennedy Norman Mailer portrayed in "*Superman Comes to the Supermarket*" as the college football hero star of a dozen 1940s Hollywood musicals bringing his electric magnetism, his movie star charisma, to heal us of our sins. [5]

But if it didn't begin in 1968, 1968 was the year it blossomed.

One might say it had its conception in 1967 and was born in all its fullness in Richard Nixon's 1968 campaign. In one of those chance meetings that bend history, in 1967 in the make-up room prepping for the *Mike Douglas Show* Richard Nixon met a young Roger Ailes. Nixon told Ailes he hated television with its makeup and phoniness. Ailes, with the self-promoter's sharp eye for an opportunity and the guts to grasp it, told Nixon that he botched the 1960 election because he didn't know how to use television. It is now commonplace among political historians to say that Richard Nixon lost the 1960 presidential election because of that year's first televised presidential debates. He might also have lost it because of some creative ballot counting in Cook County, Illinois, but it was Nixon's sad performance in the televised debates that made the contest close enough that Cook County came into play.

In those debates, the camera's love affair with John F. Kennedy made all the difference. The telegenic Kennedy looked like how a leader is supposed to look – handsome, intelligent, poised and in control. Nixon, in contrast, with his "five o'clock shadow," his insecurity beneath the klieg lights sweating his brow, and his obvious discomfort made him appear shifty and untrustworthy. Among those who only saw the debate on television, Kennedy won. More interesting, however,

among those who heard it on radio, the majority thought Nixon the better informed with a surer command of the issues. Nixon won on radio.

Unfortunately for Nixon, radio was yesterday's medium; the present – and future – was – and would be – all television. In 1968, Roger Ailes would teach him how to use it.

Nixon listened, and hired Ailes. As Joe McGinness recounts in *The Selling of the President*, Ailes re-invented presidential politics as a variation on consumer package goods advertising. [6] Ailes coached Nixon how to use the medium of television: no one else in the room so that Nixon's eyes stayed focused on the camera and did not look at anyone else making him appear shifty; no spontaneous interviews, always pre-scripted conversations with off-screen interviewers; Nixon's voice as narrator over advertisements with powerful images of the year's chaos in the streets; and the invention of the political infomercial in which Nixon met with a preselected panel of allegedly typical American voters asking scripted questions meant to look like a town meeting hosted by Bud Wilkinson, a trusted football coach of the era.

Ailes used the analytical tools of marketing to script Nixon's appeal. Ailes understood the most basic principles of marketing. He understood that it is not what you want to sell, the policy you want to promote, that counts. What does is what the buyer wants to buy, what the voter wants to hear. Listening carefully to opinion polls, Ailes and the Nixon team knew that fear was the theme of the moment. Amidst 1968's corrosive violence, Americans feared their society was crumbling.

To convey his message, Ailes and the Nixon team understood there were only four variables with which to work: product, place, price, and promotion. Nixon was his product, but he had a history, and he was not media genic. Hence, downplay the history and put him only in situations where he was comfortable (see above). Ailes controlled where Nixon appeared, limiting personal appearances, and relying on television advertising. Although expensive for the candidate, this made it cheap to see Nixon – free, actually, for the consumer, as Nixon was not the first, but the first to massively use television advertising to convey his message.

Regarding the message, there are only three basic appeals one can use to attempt to persuade anyone to do anything – facts, trust, and emotions. Nixon's history cast doubt on his trustworthiness, and factually he agreed with President Johnson on the Vietnam War. That only left emotions. The most powerful of which is fear, and 1968 was a year in which fear oozed across the American psyche. Political assassinations, crime in the streets, and race riots in the cities – Ailes packaged Nixon as the *safety* choice – the law-and-order choice. Safer than Hubert Humphrey because he was tougher on crime, but not as crazy as George Wallace. When blended into a southern strategy reassuring southerners that he'd go slow on civil rights, Nixon became the *safe* choice.

The candidate as product gives the people what they want – leading from behind, in a certain sense.

And so, it has been ever since.

Ailes said Nixon would be the last politician elected president – all the rest would be performers. In thinking about Richard Nixon's successors, it's hard to say Ailes was wrong. Gerald Ford was outperformed by Jimmy Carter's reassuring folksy presence, which in turn was swamped by Ronald Reagan's command of the camera projecting optimism and reassurance; George H.W. Bush employed Roger Ailes to burnish his image as a World War II fighter pilot, followed Ailes' advice to unleash race baiting ads about felon Willie Horton and allowed Ailes to use consumer focus groups to decide which policies to promote. Then, in 1992, seeking re-election, Bush was dazzled by an optical scanner, stumbled in a checkout line trying to appear "just one of the people," which betrayed his patrician roots, and he soon was out done by "Slick Willie" Clinton's saxophone playing and Ross Perot's flip charts. George W. Bush might be the exception to this evolving rule, playing no role but himself – a good old boy who just happened to be a fourth-generation patrician, member of Skull and Bones at Yale, but, hell, he wears cowboy boots and likes baseball. Barack Obama's lean, professorial cool worked until one realized what we needed is a leader not a professor, and Donald Trump, well, Trump just might be the showiest performer of them all – a serial bankrupt who played a successful tycoon on television seeking to enhance his brand only to discover that politics might be the only theater big enough for his outsized ego.

Ailes' influence, as I suspect you already know, continues to pervade American culture, for not only did he give America Richard Nixon, ironically enough, arguably the last liberal president, but he also invented Fox News in which he took his marketing sense of giving the people what they want to its logical extreme inventing a format in which the only news fit to broadcast must be slightly camouflaged opinion masquerading as news feeding the red meat of fear and loathing for anyone who does not look or think like them to America's resentful essentialists.

That there is some justice in the world rests in Ailes "final act," in which he was cast out in disgrace from the empire he created for serially sexually harassing the women reporters he hired to purvey his ersatz news. [7]

Fox News is not the only media creation whose genesis traces back to the presidential election of 1968. Every cable news talking head of any political persuasion owes his or her career to William F. Buckley and Gore Vidal, whose acid-laced exchanges covering 1968's conventions invented a new genre of TV news. [8] Actually, not news, but a quasi-news commentary show in which the commentary then becomes the news that subsequent news shows then debate in a media version of a perpetual motion machine. In essence, one of the more banal

but powerfully influential examples of what Daniel Boorstin meant as a *pseudo-event* – a contrived situation sculpted to the media’s requirements that then becomes its own story.

It then found its ultimate expression in today’s social media cluttered world with a president who tweeted! Tweets then became the subject of the news, the analysis of which became the news of the day until the next tweet. That former President Trump was subsequently banned from tweeting then became its own news cycle to be finally supplanted by an ego-driven billionaire’s not-yet-consummated offer to buy tweeting’s source, Twitter, to restore free speech. Thus, the cycle completes itself, so that the media itself is now the story and the politicians, their policies or lack of policies, their feuds and foibles are relegated to sidebar status (in the old days of legitimate newspapers, the second tier) as the media narcissistically celebrates itself.

There were at least three other consequences of the 1968 presidential election:

1. Party Purity post-1968.

The strange convergence of Goldwater’s 1964 “*choice not an echo*” and SDS’s Port Huron Statement’s desire to purge the Democratic Party of the Dixiecrats led us to our current situation of ideologically pure parties, perhaps for the first time in American politics since the struggles between Hamilton’s Federalists and Jefferson’s Democratic-Republicans. Prior to 1968, one could argue there were four parties in America: Northern Liberal Democrats, Southern Conservative Democrats, Eastern Liberal Republicans, and Western Conservative Republicans.

Post-1968 we have had increasingly more or less ideologically pure parties – Liberal/Progressive Democrats and Conservative Republicans with no need to bargain with one another. The old order required coalition building; the new order requires party purity and a beggar thy opponent partisanship. Further aggravating this partisan divide is the primary election system that emerged post-1968. The distorted primary system is too important to simply gloss; it merits an in-depth **Book Note** of its own. The short version is that after their disastrous 1968 convention, in which progressive Democrats thought Hubert Humphrey only won the nomination because of machinations in the fabled “smoke-filled room,” the party decided to institute state-by-state primaries to elect convention delegates. The Republicans, also not clearly seeing the future and seeing no problem, enacted a similar program.

The part that requires a more in-depth analysis is that the primary system empowers what are benignly called “super-voters” – those who vote in almost every election. It gives disproportionate influence to the most politically motivated voters. For Democrats, that resulted in George McGovern’s landslide loss in 1972. For the rest of us, it has resulted a half-century later in elections in which party candidates, in true marketing fashion, pitch their appeal to the most extreme wing

of their respective parties. When combined with the party purity described above, we arrive at 2022's extremely polarized political landscape.

2. Loss of Faith in Government.

Gen Z and Millennial readers of these *Notes* might find it implausible, if not simply unbelievable, but there was once a time when Americans trusted their government, or at least most, if not the overwhelming majority, of Americans trusted their government. According to the Pew Research Center in 1958, just before the dawn of the 1960s, 75 percent of Americans said they trusted the government; that peaked at about 76-77 percent in early 1965. It has been all downhill since reaching a nadir under President Trump in March 2019 of 17 percent and has only marginally rebounded to a moving average of 20 percent under President Biden on May 1, 2022. [9]

Now, anti-government sentiment is in the American DNA – we were founded in rebellion against the established order. But post-1968 America has never recovered from the twin hammers of Vietnam, in which Americans discovered the government could be flat out wrong and lie to protect itself, and Watergate, in which the highest levels of government could be involved in a criminal conspiracy and lie to cover it up. Not to mention that in 2020-2021, several members of the U.S. House of Representatives allegedly co-conspired with a defeated President to try to overturn a legal election! This loss of faith in government has led to continuous campaigns in which candidates run against government itself undermining the ability of government to govern, although, if you think about it even for only a moment, there is ironically no shortage of candidates wanting to lead this government they allegedly do not trust.

No one ever said it had to make sense.

3. The End of the Liberal Consensus.

There once was such a thing – it consisted of two macro-concepts: in foreign affairs America's global role as protector of democracy and liberty, as chief restrainer of communism, and as chief arbiter of the world economic order; in domestic affairs it was an essential, if uneasy, occasionally rancorous, bipartisan acceptance of FDR's New Deal. That began to unravel in 1968, as western Republicans turned against Nelson Rockefeller and eastern liberal republicans and southern Democrats abandoned the Democratic Party for Nixon's southern strategy. In hindsight, one should have seen it coming, for just below the surface, there was always an opposition, sometimes loyal, sometimes not, to that consensus.

In the 1930s, it was America Firsters and the vile Father Coughlin; in the 1940s and 1950s Ohio's Senator Robert Taft and others pursuing a course of legitimate conservatism, while bubbling up from beneath there was Senator Joe McCarthy's

communist witch hunt and Robert Welch's John Birch Society. Later in the 1950s, there was the birth of movement conservatism, which found its avatar in Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, whose losing 1964 presidential bid did offer some powerful portents of the future. He won only five states, his own and four in the formerly solidly Democratic South that gave Nixon and Ailes their opening for the southern strategy four years later in 1968. And, of course, throughout the middle- and late-1960s, there was California Governor Ronald Reagan mounting his challenge against the liberal consensus.

One who did see it coming was President Lyndon B. Johnson, who after he signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 allegedly uttered, "We (the Democrats) have lost the South for a generation." If he did say it, he was only partially correct, for the Democrats lost the South not for a generation, but for generations. About which, we'll learn more in the next **Book Note** as we explore "Race in America" and the seeds of our discontent: George Wallace in 1968 showing Donald Trump the future, Nixon's southern strategy wedding with Strom Thurmond's Dixiecrats, Ronald Reagan announcing his presidential candidacy in the shadow of Mississippi burning, Bush I and Willie Horton – all of them sprouting from the seeds of our discontent planted in 1968.



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Roger Ailes as a young man, **Jerry Mosey/AP at NPR.org** available at [here](#), accessed June 12, 2022.
Roger Ailes and Richard Nixon in a scene from "Divide and Conquer: The Story of Roger Ailes," **Magnolia Pictures** available at [here](#), accessed June 12, 2022.

End Notes

1. "Protean" at **Collins English Language Dictionary** available [here](#), accessed June 13, 2022.
2. Quoted in Lewis L. Gould, **1968: The Election That Changed America**, 2nd Edition. (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee: The America Way Series, 2010, originally published in 1993), p. 155.
3. Passel, Jeffrey S. and D'Vera Cohn, "U.S. Population Projections: 2005-2050" at **The Pew Research Center** available [here](#), accessed June 12, 2022.
4. Hanisch, Carol. "The Personal Is Political" at **Carol Hanisch.org** available [here](#), accessed June 13, 2022.
5. For a fuller discussion of Mailer's seminal essay on the charismatic power of "starshine" to shape American politics, see my **Book Note** "Mediated America Part One: Superman Comes to the Supermarket" available [here](#), accessed June 13, 2022.

6. Although now dated and a bit thin in its treatment of Roger Ailes, Joe McGinniss's *The Selling of the President 1968* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1969) presents the original media analysis of Nixon's campaign. For a more up-to-date treatment, see Lawrence O'Donnell's *Playing With Fire: The 1968 Election and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017). Useful for its analysis of the future implications of that 1968 campaign, see Theodore H. White *The Making of the President 1968* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010, originally published in 1969). For a short but insightful treatment of the election, see Lewis L. Gould *1968: The Election That Changed America* 2nd Edition. (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee: The America Way Series, 2010, originally published in 1993).
7. See among innumerable other sites, Emily Crockett, "Here are the women who have publicly accused Roger Ailes of sexual harassment" at **Vox** available [here](#), accessed June 13, 2022.
8. For a taste of cable news' ancestry in the Gore Vidal v. William F. Buckley debates see this video at **You Tube** (there are dozens) "Gore Vidal vs. William Buckley Democratic Convention 1968..." at **You Tube** available [here](#), accessed June .
9. "Public Trust in Government: 1958-2022", at **The Pew Research Center** available [here](#), accessed June 13, 2022.

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