



THE SIXTIES

America's Decade of Crisis and Change

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I was pleased to be asked by the Guilderland Public Library to participate in this series and present "Reflections on the Sixties." It is the least I can do. Beginning when I taught at Princeton University, I have circulated an annual list of my favorite books, mostly history and nonfiction. In preparing the 2003 Book List, copies of which are available tonight, I had valuable help from the Library staff. In my talk, I recommend several of the books on this list.

The sixties were marked by dramatic events – the civil rights revolution, the Great Society, the war in Viet Nam, Woodstock and the counterculture, and the rise (and afterwards the fall) of President Nixon. I had a front row seat as an observer, and in some instances a participant-observer, in these events, living in Washington for most of the sixties.

At twenty-five years old in 1960, I had recently gone to work for U.S. Senator Kenneth B. Keating (R, NY), a person I greatly admired who was defeated for re-election by Robert F. Kennedy in 1964. As an aide to Keating, I literally had a front row seat on one especially memorable occasion, in 1961 to hear John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address. It was freezing that day. It had taken me four hours the night before to get home in a raging snowstorm. Then, soon afterwards, I had to turn around to go back to the Capitol in time to hear Kennedy's rousing call to public service: "Ask not what your country can do for you: Ask what you can do for your country."

In the years I had worked for Keating, I often sat in the back of the Senate Chamber and watched Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson in action. Robert Caro's third volume of his biography of Johnson, *MASTER OF THE SENATE: THE YEARS OF LYNDON JOHNSON*, is featured on my *2003 Book List*. Johnson cajoled and mastered Democrats and Republicans alike, resembling the conductor of a great orchestra. He was everywhere, always in charge. I recall one occasion when Johnson wanted to tell Keating to do something and used his extraordinary "treatment" on me because Keating was not around. Bending over me, pushing me backwards, literally spitting in my ear (I can still feel it), he told me to have Keating do thus and so.

Caro's big book (1,049 pages) is only his fourth book; it took him twelve years to write it. Describing his debts in writing the book, Caro refers to his "research team," and says it consisted of two people, himself and his wife, Ina. The first one hundred pages of this book is a discourse on the Senate as a stodgy, recalcitrant institution that Lyndon Johnson's mastery fundamentally changed. Of Johnson's civil rights record, Caro says:

Lyndon Baines Johnson was the greatest champion that black Americans and Mexican-Americans and indeed all Americans of color had in the White House, the greatest champion they had in all the halls of government. With the single exception of Lincoln, he was the greatest champion with a white skin that they had in the history of the Republic.

Republican Legislators, including Kenneth Keating, who had previously been a senior member of the House Judiciary Committee, were leaders of the civil rights charge in Washington. Events happening outside of Washington were daily pushing the Eisenhower, and later the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, to enact civil rights laws. Years later, I had the privilege of meeting Rep. John Lewis (D, GA.) who in the 1960s headed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Lewis, along with others, bravely put himself in harm's way to dramatize the need for national action. He was bludgeoned and bloodied in Selma, Alabama. "There was one skull fractured," he said, "mine." Lewis's autobiography that tells about the 1966 march from Selma to Montgomery gets my vote as the most moving account of these events. Later in 1966, at age 26, Lewis was voted out as head of SNCC for not being radical enough. The greatest events of his life were behind him at this young age. His career, which has been a model of dignity and decency, is chronicled brilliantly in *WALKING WITH THE WIND: A MEMOIR OF THE MOVEMENT*, a book about the 1960s that you must not miss.

In 1964, Kenneth Keating lost his Senate seat to carpet-bagging Robert F. Kennedy. At the time, I was responsible of domestic policy research for Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller's bid to be the Republican presidential candidate. Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona was selected instead, and Rockefeller loaned me back to Senator Keating for his re-election campaign. That was my only up-close experience in an election. Goldwater lost New York by two million votes. Keating did better, losing to Kennedy by 700,000 votes. Because the leading political reporters in the country wanted to cover Bobby Kennedy, they had to cover Keating as well. So, I got to know the

reporters who were then, and in many cases still are, the nation's premier political journalists.

Robert Kennedy was his brother's and President Lyndon Johnson's Attorney General. He had an incredibly bitter and hateful feud with Johnson that went back to the 1960 Democratic Convention. A fine book by Jeff Shesol *MUTUAL CONTEMPT: LYNDON JOHNSON, ROBERT KENNEDY, AND THE FEUD THAT DEFINED A DECADE*, is all about their steamy relationship.

Life at the top in American politics is mean. Corporate life of course is no picnic, but high politics is especially rough and tumble. Kennedy gets the better treatment by Shesol. Johnson in the final analysis is portrayed as paranoid as war pressures mounted, leading to his dramatic announcement in March of 1968 that he would not stand for re-election. I particularly took note of what the Shesol had to say about the National Advisory Commission on Civil — the Kerner commission, named after Otto Kerner, governor of Illinois. Said Shesol,

The Democratic disaffected had lost faith in LBJ, despite all he had done or tried to do, and he had lost faith in them. He took their attraction to Kennedy as a deeply personal affront. Consumed by the war and bitterly resentful of black “subversives,” Johnson effectively cut poverty and civil rights from his agenda. By 1967, he spoke less of hope and progress than of safe streets and crime control — “euphemisms,” scoffed Pat Moynihan, “for the forcible repression of black violence.” When the President’s Commission on Civil Disorders proposed a range of “traditional” policies to quiet urban unrest, LBJ refused even to read the report.

Shesol is right. Johnson was angry and took it out on the Kerner commission. I was associate director of the commission for research. Before that, I worked at the Brookings Institution. John Lindsay, mayor of New York City, asked me to join the commission staff. In those years, Lindsay was a Republican. For reasons I will never understand, he was named by Johnson to be vice chair of the Kerner commission.

The most vicious of the riots that hot summer occurred in Detroit and Newark. I knew Lindsay only a little. I was in my office at Brookings one day during that tense period when the phone rang and a voice I didn't recognize said, “Dick, this is John Lindsay. I am at the White House, and they're trying to get me. I need your help.” (I thought it was somebody pulling my leg.)

To make the story short, my “help” to Lindsay consisted of joining the staff of the Kerner commission. I directed a research group that was first told to prepare interim “policy” recommendations, and later final recommendations. While we were at work on what we thought were near-term proposals on jobs, housing, education, welfare, and community development, I received word that President Johnson was taking away all of the money for the commission and that the staff was to be disbanded. I knew there was

tension; I had heard that budget director Charlie Schultze was trying to stave off the President's anger. But apparently, he could do it no longer.

Fortunately, I was on loan from Brookings (the government paid the Institution for my time), so I was not at risk. But all the people the commission had hired lost their jobs. A virtual forced-draft process was immediately launched to take everything ostensibly prepared for the first report and make it the text of what became the commission's final report. The report was issued in paperback by Bantam Books, and I am told it sold 6 million copies, the only best seller I ever even got close to. The report, still worth reading, was famous for the line: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white — separate and unequal."

1968 was a watershed year. Lyndon Johnson announced in March that he would not stand for re-election. Robert Kennedy said he would run, but alas, soon afterwards, was assassinated while campaigning in Los Angeles. When the dust settled in 1968, Nixon had defeated Hubert Humphrey. Earlier that year, I was again working for Nelson Rockefeller in another effort by him to be the presidential standard bearer of his party. When Nixon was nominated instead, Rockefeller, like the owner of a sport's team, "traded" me to Nixon to help him in his campaign against Humphrey and to work on transition planning. This is how at the end of the sixties I got to see life in the Executive Office of the President up close. I became assistant director of the U.S. Bureau of the Budget for human resources, the best job I have ever held. I was involved in developing Nixon's "New Federalism" domestic policies, which Tom Wicker in his book about the Nixon presidency said are not appreciated for their many progressive innovations.

Nixon moved quickly after the election to set up the machinery for domestic policymaking. As one of his first acts, he established the Urban Affairs Council and brought in Daniel Patrick Moynihan to direct the group. At the first meeting of the council on January 23, 1969, Nixon told us to develop bold approaches. He said the first few months of a new administration are the time for change and warned against acquiring a vested interest in program failures.

Nixon's domestic agenda involved restructuring two types of federal domestic programs: grants-in-aid under which assistance is provided to state and local governments, and income-transfer programs through which assistance is provided to needy families and individuals.

The first statement of Nixon's plan came August 8, 1969 in a television address to the nation in which he first used the term "New Federalism." The origins of the address are interesting. During the period from Nixon's inauguration until August 8, the business of domestic policymaking dragged on. Protracted meetings had been held on program details. This was especially the case for welfare reform, which at every turn became more difficult and complex than had been anticipated. Nixon was impatient. Early in July he instructed his press secretary, Ronald Ziegler, to state publicly that his domestic program would be announced the first week of August. The die was cast, and in this case the deadline was met.

Nixon's August 1969 address on domestic policy, which aired in prime evening time, laid out the philosophy of his program and presented four proposals – welfare reform, revenue sharing, a new manpower training act, and the reorganization of the Office of Economic Opportunity which operated the LBJ's "war on poverty." The program was well received. An article in *The Economist*, August 6, 1969, stated:

It is not exaggeration to say that president Nixon's television message on welfare reform and revenue sharing may rank in importance with Present Roosevelt's first proposal for a social security system in the mid-1930s....

The article concluded,

The chances are that most men, and most members of Congress, will in the end see that these major reforms are right for this time and this country.

Nixon's "New Federalism" policies had a lot to commend them. Other issues destroyed his presidency – the Viet Nam war and Watergate. I especially recall one night when I was working late with a White House assistant on welfare reform and the streets were swarming with protestors against the bombings in Cambodia. The presidential aide I was working with was told to call all sub-cabinet appointees in the domestic area and ask them what they thought of the bombings. One of my colleagues, an official at the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, said he hated the bombings. The aide making the calls, who was a former Nixon advance man, never reported this one. And lucky for me, he never asked me what I thought.

Those were awful times. I left the government right after the 1972 election to return to Brookings. As a result, I missed being there during the Watergate trauma. But I knew about a lot of the people involved. Some of them clearly were up to no good. But others surprised me – notably John Ehrlichman. His role in Watergate saddened me the most.

It was now the post sixties. To me, the central lesson of Watergate was that nearly all of Nixon's closest advisors were the same kinds of people – hardball pols. When Watergate came up, they reinforced each other. The lesson for good government is that you have to have a balanced group of advisors – press types, political types, and old hands in government who can bring high values to bear in intense crises of which there are many in campaign seasons.

Although it is tempting to give high meaning to decennial periods that end in zero, the sixties were a kind of democratic awakening in America. On the eve of the sixties, in 1958, John Kenneth Galbraith published *THE AGE OF AFFLUENCE* about

using more of America's wealth for public service and less for private consumption. This is hardly the spirit of the current period. But there a sense in which the sixties saw a widening and spreading of politicization by ordinary people. We tend to associate this with such movements in American history as Jacksonian democracy, populism, and progressivism in the nineteenth century. But they involved elites more than ordinary citizens. The sixties saw a flowering of flower children — the Beatles, civil rights, and war protestors. Large numbers of people declared their political independence. It was exciting to see and feel this. It put an indelible mark on our national culture.

For the *2003 Book List*, see www.rockinst.org