

**Faculty of Letters and Languages – M’sila**

**Department of English**

**Level:** Master One

**Course:** American Civilization

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## **Lecture Three: The Tumultuous Seventies: Protests of Minority Groups**

### **Introduction:**

The underestimation of the seventies’ importance, especially during the early years of the decade, is easy to forgive because the character of the seventies was substantially shaped at first by spillover from the sixties. Such sixties events as the invasion of Cambodia, and a large portion of the war in Vietnam took place in the seventies. Although sixties radicals (cultural and political) spent the early seventies loudly bemoaning the end of the revolution, what was in fact going on was the working of the phenomena of the sixties into the mainstream of American life. So the sixties became a normal part of American culture, and the seventies were characterized by the large involvement of Student movements across all aspects of American political and cultural life.

### **I-Origins of the Student Movement**

The student movement arose at the University of California at Berkeley in 1964, when students involved in civil rights activism chafed at the university’s sudden attempt to prevent them from organizing politically on campus. The **Free Speech Movement** arose to challenge the university’s restrictions on political speech and assembly. Soon, other student groups were springing up across the nation with similar demands. **Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)** formed at the University of Michigan and issued the **Port Huron Statement**, which criticized US foreign policy and attacked the **Cold War** assumptions underlying it. Some of these student groups became a major part of the **New Left**, a broad-based political movement that challenged existing forms of authority, while others embraced a counterculture that promoted sexual liberation and unabashed drug use.

## II-Vietnam and the Rise of the Antiwar Movement

As the US involvement in the **Vietnam War** intensified, so did antiwar sentiment. Especially after 1965, when President **Lyndon Johnson** dramatically escalated the US troop presence and bombing campaigns in Vietnam, the war became the focal point for student political activism. Student groups held protests and demonstrations, burned draft cards, and chanted slogans like “Hey, hey LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?” Massive US spending on the war effort contributed to skyrocketing deficits and deteriorating economic conditions at home, which turned more segments of the American public, including religious groups, civil rights organizations, and eventually even some Vietnam veterans, against the war. Although antiwar activism constrained the president’s ability to further escalate the war effort after 1965, it also lent credence to the conservative portrayal of a chaotic society desperately in need of “law and order.” In 1968, **Richard Nixon** successfully campaigned for the presidency on the basis of such rhetoric, which implied a harsh approach to dealing with antiwar activists and other challengers of the status quo. Once in office, Nixon attempted to quash domestic dissent by reducing the US troop presence in Vietnam and reforming the draft. The elimination of the draft and its replacement with an all-volunteer professional army was a major lasting consequence of the antiwar movement. At the same time, Nixon authorized the FBI and the CIA to expand their surveillance and harassment of antiwar protest groups.

## III-From the Civil Rights Movement to Women's Liberation

In the 1950s and 1960s, the **Civil Rights Movement** was creating a climate of protest as activists claimed rights and new positions in society for people of color. Women filled significant roles in organizations fighting for civil rights like the **Student National Coordinating Committee (SNCC)** and **Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)**. However, women often found that those organizations—enlightened as they might have been about racial issues or the war in Vietnam—could still be influenced by patriarchal ideas of male superiority. Two members of SNCC, **Casey Hayden** and **Mary King**, presented some of their concerns about their organization’s treatment of women in a document entitled “On the Position of Women in SNCC,” which argued that SNCC practiced discrimination against women similar to the discrimination practiced against African Americans by whites. Stokely Carmichael, field

organizer and future chairman of SNCC, joked that the position for women in the movement was “prone.” Nevertheless, the Civil Rights Movement contributed materially to women's rights. The **Civil Rights Act of 1964**, which prohibited discrimination in employment on the basis of race, color, national origin, and religion, also prohibited discrimination on the basis of sex in **Title VII**. Ironically, protection for women had been included at the suggestion of a Virginia congressman in an attempt to *prevent* the act’s passage; his reasoning seemed to be that, while a white man might accept that African Americans needed and deserved protection from discrimination, the idea that women deserved equality with men would be far too radical for any of his male colleagues to contemplate. Nevertheless, the act passed, granting broad workplace protections to women and minorities.

#### ***IV-The Feminine Mystique and NOW***

Just as the abolitionist movement made nineteenth-century women more aware of their lack of power and encouraged them to form the **first women’s rights movement**--sometimes called first-wave feminism--the protest movements of the 1960s inspired many white and middle-class women to create their own organized movement for greater rights--known as **second-wave feminism**. Many were older, married women who found the traditional roles of housewife and mother unfulfilling. In 1963, writer and feminist **Betty Friedan** published *The Feminine Mystique*, a nonfiction book in which she contested the post-World War II belief that it was women’s destiny to marry and bear children. Friedan’s book was a best-seller and began to raise the consciousness of many women who agreed that homemaking in the suburbs sapped them of their individualism and left them unsatisfied. In 1966, the **National Organization for Women (NOW)**, formed and proceeded to set an agenda for the feminist movement. Framed by a statement of purpose written by Friedan, the agenda began by proclaiming NOW’s goal to make possible women’s participation in all aspects of American life and to gain for them all the rights enjoyed by men. Among the specific goals set was the passage of the **Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)**, a proposed Constitutional Amendment guaranteeing equal right for women. First introduced in Congress in 1923, the ERA was passed in 1972 but failed to receive the 38 state ratifications necessary to become part of the Constitution. It has yet to be adopted today.

## **V-Native American Protest**

During this period, many Native Americans were seeking to maintain their culture or retrieve cultural elements that had been lost. In 1968, a group of Native American activists, including Dennis Banks, George Mitchell, and Clyde Bellecourt, convened a gathering of two hundred people in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and formed the **American Indian Movement**, or **AIM**. The organizers were urban dwellers frustrated by decades of poverty and discrimination. In 1970, the average life expectancy for a Native American person was 46 years compared to the national average of 69. The Native American suicide rate was twice that of the general population, and the infant mortality rate was the highest in the country. Half of all Native Americans lived on reservations, where unemployment reached 50 percent. Of Native Americans living in cities, 20 percent lived below the poverty line. On November 20, 1969, a small group of Native American activists landed on Alcatraz Island—the former site of a notorious federal prison—in San Francisco Bay. They announced plans to build a Native American cultural center, including a history museum, an ecology center, and a spiritual sanctuary. People on the mainland provided supplies by boat, and celebrities visited Alcatraz to publicize the cause. More people joined the protestors until they numbered about four hundred.

## **Conclusion**

Today some of the issues that dominated the seventies have faded away. But it is striking how early it still seems to be in the process of working out the implications of that tumultuous period. During the seventies themselves the new issues that were arising seemed nowhere near as important as those sixties legacies, minority rights and Vietnam and Watergate. But the runt of decades has wound up casting a much longer shadow than anyone imagined.

**Exercises: In a short essay discuss one of the following topics:**

1- How were the American Indian Movement and the women's rights movement similar to the Civil Rights Movement? How were they different?

2- Do you think that second-wave feminism was a separate movement from the Civil Rights Movement, or just a different facet of it? Why?

**REFERENCES**

Lemann, N. (2001) "How The Seventies Changed America." *American Heritage*.

Link: <https://www.americanheritage.com/how-seventies-changed-america#>

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