



# **The Eve of Destruction: How 1965 Transformed America**

*James T. Patterson*

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At the beginning of 1965, the U.S. seemed on the cusp of a golden age. Although Americans had been shocked by the assassination in 1963 of President Kennedy, they exuded a sense of consensus and optimism that showed no signs of abating. Indeed, political liberalism and interracial civil rights activism made it appear as if 1965 would find America more progressive and unified than it had ever been before. In January 1965, President Lyndon Johnson proclaimed that the country had “no irreconcilable conflicts.”

Johnson, who was an extraordinarily skillful manager of Congress, succeeded in securing an avalanche of Great Society legislation in 1965, including Medicare, immigration reform, and a powerful Voting Rights Act. But as esteemed historian James T. Patterson reveals in *The Eve of Destruction*, that sense of harmony dissipated over the course of the year. As Patterson shows, 1965 marked the birth of the tumultuous era we now know as “The Sixties,” when American society and culture underwent a major transformation. Turmoil erupted in the American South early in the year, when police attacked civil rights demonstrators in Selma, Alabama. Many black leaders, outraged, began to lose faith in nonviolent and interracial strategies of protest. Meanwhile, the U.S. rushed into a deadly war in Vietnam, inciting rebelliousness at home. On August 11th, five days after Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, racial violence exploded in the Watts area of Los Angeles. The six days of looting and arson that followed shocked many Americans and cooled their enthusiasm for the president's remaining initiatives. As the national mood darkened, the country became deeply divided. By the end of 1965, a conservative resurgence was beginning to redefine the political scene even as developments in popular music were enlivening the Left.

In *The Eve of Destruction*, Patterson traces the events of this transformative year, showing how they dramatically reshaped the nation and reset the course of American life.

## The Eve of Destruction: How 1965 Transformed America Details

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## Socraticgadfly says

Solid explainer of why 1965 should be the year that defines the 60s.

Patterson notes major changes include:

1. Fragmenting of the civil rights movement;
2. Many younger civil rights leaders becoming more antiwar focused;
3. Watts;
4. The Great Society hitting bureaucracy and lack of money by the end of the year
5. In music, The Stones' "Satisfaction" marking a new "edge" to rock, now no longer so saccharine. (Related, Patterson notes, is Dylan "plugging in" for the first time.)

Two other takeaways:

1. LBJ really was paranoid, and egotistic. The two combined in seeing communist conspiracies, focused on him, behind much of the opposition to Vietnam.
2. The "mainstream media" really was "in the tank" for war-hawking on Nam.

Nothing in-depth, but a good, easy read.

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## Margaret Sankey says

Patterson was a 30 year old assistant history professor in 1965, little knowing that he would spend his career working on the times he was about to live through. In this book, he identifies that year as a crucial and tragic turning point, beginning at the high water mark of optimistic liberalism--major Great Society programs, the Voting Rights Act, the Economic Opportunity Act, reform of immigration law and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. But within a year, escalation in Vietnam, the Watts riots and increasingly organized conservative backlash started to grind down the possibilities and spawned tactics and vocabulary like "welfare mothers" and "socialized medicine" that are still in play. Patterson pulls no punches on the behavior of Johnson, presenting him as a difficult, unpleasant man who did genuinely believe in many of the good things he accomplished and who also seemed to understand that he was also going down a bad road he couldn't control. This is an excellent, short introduction to the politics and cultural changes of the 60s.

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## Dave Hoff says

As 1913 was year before the War, and the Emperors in Europe this book is about what happened in 1965 & Pres. LBJ, Emperor of America. More I read of LBJ, I learn what a rotten man. Quote. When the Chancellor of W. Germany asked him if he had been born in a log cabin, LBJ replied "no, that was Lincoln, I was born in a manager" He had the Great Society and Vietnam going at the same time, both a disaster. While Ike believed in the virtue of decency and respect for law, LBJ gave "the Treatment" to get his way.

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## John Kennedy says

It's good to be reminded of how much society has changed since — for women, for minorities, for students. The book details how LBJ's ambitious legislative agenda ushered in Medicare, expanded civil rights protections, immigration leniency, and education broadening. Patterson shows how much of the Great Society was oversold, with programs receiving inadequate funding or, more often, incompetent oversight. LBJ's paranoia about communism and his secretive buildup of troops in Vietnam is a dominant theme of *Eve of Destruction*. The book is repetitious in spots, as the impact of many events spilled into later years.

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## Liam says

"William Shannon, Washington correspondent for *Commonweal*, wrote in early April that LBJ was the 'master of the America-is-a-great-wonderful-barbecue school of politics.' Shannon added, 'His programs are designed to evade rather than confront the hard issues. He believe in consensus, not conflict. The barbecue school of politics is not based on any belief in redistributing wealth or disturbing anyone's existing privileges; rather, it presupposes that there is enough meat, and gravy, too, for everyone at the tables.'" (113)

""I had a dream, I had a dream" -- hell, we don't need no dreams. We want jobs."" (quoting Watts resident post-riot, post-King visit, 182)

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## Karen says

Patterson's look back at 1965 primarily focuses on three issues: Vietnam, LBJ's "Great Society" and civil rights. He brings these issues together into his main thesis which is that 1965 was both the peak of the Great Society -- and of our belief in government -- and the year that set the stage for what we think of as the turbulent 60's.

1965 began with about 23,000 "military advisors" in Vietnam and ended with 185,000 combat troops on the ground. Even though President Johnson privately acknowledged that a military victory was unlikely, he escalated the war and did so while being untruthful with the American people. 1965 sowed the seeds for the "credibility gap" that helped disenchant many people with government.

In part, LBJ tried to keep his actions in Vietnam quiet because he was afraid the truth would upset his ambitious and expensive legislative agenda. Viewing Congress today, it's hard to believe the incredible quantity of significant legislation that was passed in 1965: Medicare/Medicaid, education reform (ESEA), immigration reform, the "War on Poverty" and, of course, the Voting Rights Act -- just to name a few!

As a political pro, Johnson knew he had limited time to get his bills passed before he would become "Lame Duck Lyndon", but this lead to hasty action. Legislation was passed quickly, but some of the new initiatives were flawed and the flood of bills created administrative overload and confusion. Johnson over promised and then under delivered, building disappointment and frustration among people who were becoming more and more rights-conscious.

It was in the area of civil rights that Johnson achieved greatness. Patterson traces events from March's "Bloody Sunday" at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma to signing of the Voting Rights Act in August. He illustrates that despite progress, the civil rights movement was starting to fragment as the value of non-violence was being questioned and civil rights leaders began to address the impact of both poverty and the war in Vietnam. Specifically, events such as the Watts Riots (just 5 days after the Voting Rights Act was signed) made it clear that economic opportunity was as important as the right to vote.

The only weak points in the book are where Patterson looks at pop culture in an effort to illustrate the changes taking place in society. Despite naming his book after "Eve of Destruction", the great song performed by Barry McGuire, Patterson's comments about pop culture feel a bit forced. He is on much firmer ground when discussing the political & military arenas.

Overall I enjoyed this very informative, well written and thoughtful book.

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### **Sally Ewan says**

I decided to read this book because it focused on 1965, the year I was born. What an eye-opener! Many things that I take for granted today were just starting back then, thanks to LBJ's Great Society programs. Just listen to this list of "landmark legislation of 1965: the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Medicare and Medicaid, the Voting Rights Act, immigration reform, the Higher Education Act, the National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities, and many others." So just within my lifetime Medicare came into being and developed into the beast we see today. Despite good intentions, these programs have not done what they hoped, and have created additional, unforeseen problems. Patterson mentions the overlap and inefficiency resulting from the multiplying of government programs and the resulting sense of entitlement. The other strand winding through the book is the escalation of our involvement in Vietnam, a lost cause from the very beginning. Reading this along with books about the founding of our country, and living in these troubled times, I get a sense that this dear world is ever-increasingly unravelling. We are not moving toward 'more and better', but toward confusion and darkness. Broken cisterns, indeed.

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### **G. says**

I love a good history book and this one was excellent. The Sixties as we know them actually didn't really start up until 1965. This is the story of that year, focusing on Lyndon Johnson, who started the year with a message of hope, and ended it as an embattled proponent of a failing war. This book tries to paint a panoramic view of that year: the seeds that were planted and left for the rest of us to sow. Fascinating.

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### **Krissy says**

This book unpacks a lot. What sticks with me is LBJ obviously was a man who cared. He pushed through as much society reform as he could (Medicare/Medicaid, Immigration reform to reduce racism, Voting rights, education reform, etc). If only he'd been more willing to hash things out with Conservative counterparts or his fracturing liberals instead of promising broad sweeping reform without hammering out details to avoid delay. His broad sweeps couldn't perform as well as they should have if there had been more power behind his ideas. And his obsession with keeping Vietnam from communism is too much for me to even fully

comment on.

A lot of Vietnam, Civil Rights, and pop culture movies/music fill this book. I found some chapters more interesting than others. If nothing else, Patterson is thorough. As for LBJ, I'm sure he was a man of his time because frankly he wouldn't make it in today's political arena. LBJ swimming naked in front of his aides while referring to his genitals as "jumbo" is too much.

Library read.

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## **George Siehl says**

Patterson's thesis is that 1965 was a pivotal year in American politics, the high water mark of liberal legislation. He copiously documents his argument noting the many pieces of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" that were enacted that year: Medicare, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Voting rights Act, Immigration Reform, and the creation of the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, among others, Johnson endeavored to "Out-Roosevelt" FDR by passing many new liberal laws, and boasted of his success in doing so.

The dark counter-theme to this legislative barrage was the quickly escalating war in Vietnam. LBJ feared that the war would threaten passage of his Great Society agenda, thus did not seek Congressional authorization for increased troop allocations, relying instead on the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. Nor was he candid with the public about his intentions. Patterson details the evolution of the anti-war movement, part of which came from groups whose primary concerns were social, economic, and civil rights issues. Over the course of 1965 such groups as the SDS and SNCC grew, organized and opposed the war in Vietnam. This dissent fed concerns in Congress about how to pay for the war and for the new programs.

The advocates of civil rights issues also proved to be a problem for LBJ, despite his active work in their behalf. He was angered by their increasing assertions of new rights and demands for \$100 billion in funding. The LA Watts riot in August, lasting five days, brought strong backlash from much of the public, lessening Congressional support for some of LBJ's other requests.

Patterson details the work Johnson had to put into implementation of earlier Great Society legislation enacted in 1964, specifically the Office of Economic Opportunity, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and the Office of Education. Resolving these issues added to the pressure on LBJ as he tried to speed his legislation through Congress and evade discussion of Vietnam. In question, Patterson notes, was whether "LBJ and his liberal advisers possessed enough expertise to deal effectively with large, complex socioeconomic problems," and "whether the administration was promising more than the federal government ... could deliver."

Patterson depicts Johnson as egotistical ("born in a manger"), crude (his "Jumbo"), and insulting, none of which qualities are lacking in many other presidents and presidential candidates, of course.

A needless side path throughout the book is reference to pop culture of the times, primarily its music, from which Patterson has drawn his title. Every writer must find his or her narrative hook, but this instance seems a stretch.

Nonetheless, Patterson makes a very credible case for his thesis with a sound informative text. Even those who lived through 1965 as adults can be impressed--and informed--with this political re-creation and interpretation.

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### **Kevin Hoag says**

While the book was informative it was not at all what would have been expected based on the title and description, and as a result was quite disappointing. A more descriptive title might have been "Lyndon Johnson in 1965." There was a great deal going on in the U.S. and the world in 1965, and the author is certainly correct to identify it as an important year. But it was almost entirely a biography of President Johnson in that year. The world and the changes occurring that year did not revolve around President Johnson, and there were many other important factors that were hardly mentioned if at all. Everything that was reported came back to how Johnson reacted, or what Johnson tried to do. If I wanted to read a biography of Johnson the multi-volume Caro biography would have been the better choice. Well-written, concise, but a narrow emphasis making it seem as though the world revolves around the office of U.S. president.

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### **Craig Werner says**

Decent enough survey of the events that make 1965, in Patterson's words, "the hinge of the sixties." The year began with Lyndon Johnson newly elected and pushing hard to enact the most aggressive progressive legislative agenda in American history. It ended in disarray, with the shadows of the Watts riots and steady escalation (with next to new positive results) in Vietnam hanging thick over everything. Patterson, whose *Grand Expectations* is a solid history of America in the post-World War II, pre-Reagan era, emphasizes the emergence of a "rights consciousness," a confused military policy, and the failure to transform legislation into action as the key elements of the decline. There's not much here that will surprise students of the 60s and Patterson has some weak points--notably his superficial sense of popular culture. But if you have a particularly interest in 65, this provides the basics.

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### **K Steven says**

This book starts out with one big limitation - it's focussed on a single year from a defining yet tumultuous period in American history. Yet that is also the author's premise: that 1965 was a pivotal year. A year the saw the apex of liberal power and influence in politics, as well as the beginning of the unraveling of the post-WWII era of confidence in the American Dream and that America could "do no wrong." The title of the book refers to the eponymous song written by P.F. Sloan and performed by Barry McGuire, which was released to become a popular anti-establishment ballad in 1965 (by coincidence, Sloan died while I was reading the book).

If you only read one book about the LBJ presidency or the political climate of the years following the assassination of JFK, look to Richard Goodwin's "Remembering America," Doris Kearns Goodwin's "Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream," or "The Fierce Urgency of Now" by Julian Zelizer. All are better reads and all three also tell a more complete story of the period. "Eve of Destruction" is a decent book, but not a good one. Any attempt to define the 1960's year by calendar year, rather than as a series of social and political movements that overlapped and spanned many of the years of the decade - even spilling into the

1970s - does American history a disservice. And this book suffers from that weakness. It will leave you with more questions than answers in the end.

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### **John Kaufmann says**

Good solid read, 3.5 to 4 Stars. The premise of the book is that 1965 was the year when Camelot began to shatter and gave way to the turmoil of the late 1960s - 1965 set the forces in motion that led to fracturing of American society that remains with us to this day. The author makes a good case. I was in high school in 1965 and was aware of the events Patterson describes, but I never put it into the context that it was the early tremors of the earthquake that was about to hit. I began to feel the shaking when I left for college in fall of 1966, and by 1967 the cracks were open for everyone to see. I saw an "American Experience" show on PBS recently making a strong case that 1964 was the year that the consensus of the fifties and early sixties began to crack. Obviously, that two-year period was undoubtedly the pivotal period when events were set in motion. In any event, "Eve of Destruction" was a good read. Patterson provides good insights into the early divisions of the splintering of the nonviolent civil rights movement as well as the forces pushing LBJ to commit to sending US combat troops into Vietnam.

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### **Mike Luoma says**

Good survey of a pivotal year. The breadth of the subject brings with it a necessary lack of depth, yet even in broad strokes Patterson conveys a sense of the forces in balance, and falling out of balance, as - politically - the pendulum swung all the way to the liberal side - and then began to swing back. Excellent look at a year, though 50 years gone, that still influences the shape and limits of the modern world.

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