Changing Definitions of America

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The mid-twentieth century saw the eclipse of new ideas and visions for our nation. The Cold War and the Civil Rights Movement contributed to Americans questioning and developing their own concepts of what freedom meant, as well as what our true American values were. Over time, there became a differentiation of ideas as the priorities and values of different groups evolved; however, the central theme of change and democracy was consistent to all groups throughout.

In 1959, Vice President Richard Nixon represented the United States at the American National Exhibition in Moscow. At the exhibition, Nixon engaged in what we today call the “Kitchen Debate” with Nikita Khrushchev of the Soviet Union. This debate emphasized the American values of consumerism and capitalism in contrast to the Soviet Union’s communism. This version of America, illustrated by the Kitchen Debate, emphasizes the idea of the freedom to choose, enabled by free enterprise and capitalism in the economy, as explained by Nixon in the debate, “We have 1,000 different builders building 1,000 different houses...We don’t have one decision made at the top by one government official.” At this period of time, the American Dream and patriotism that followed the war were still preeminent and prioritized; Nixon states, “What we want to do is make life easier for our housewives.” This America was the romanticized version, the one that symbolized the American Dream; a Levittown home with a white picket fence, consumer culture, and pride in the right of Americans to choose products as well as indulge in luxury - something many, including Nixon, saw as what put us above the Soviet Union and its militarized rationing.

Three years later, the Students for a Democratic Society met and developed their manifesto, entitled the Port Huron Statement. It outlined the key grievances of the young generations of the 1960s (the Baby Boomers) and detailed the flaws they sought to eliminate from society. This document also established the New Left, a radical liberal movement relying on controversy, socialism, liberalism, and “modern complexity.” From the 1950s and the Kitchen Debate that illuminated consumer culture and capitalism in America, we shift now to a more cynical, “realistic” view of American society from the eyes of the college students of the 1960s. The young generation of America was severely dissatisfied in the politics and economy of the age and sought to bring about the involvement and political participation of the American people to improve human relationships and to establish democracy of independence. This shift in priorities and the development of a new movement for change illustrated the growing discontent with America: its involvement in the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the disappointing lack of action in the Civil Rights Movement, and the apathy of government at the time - presenting a desire and need to see change.

With the inauguration of President Lyndon B. Johnson came the new vision and implementation of his “Great Society.” Through government programs and legislation, Johnson fronted the War on Poverty and aimed to improve civil rights efforts. In his famous 1964 speech, entitled “The Great Society,” he details what he imagines to be a better, more perfect version of America with the upcoming generation of graduating college students: “The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time.” He emphasizes what areas of society needed the most work - he sought better education systems (in training teachers and in curriculum). He claims the focus regions were to be cities and the countryside (in addition to American classrooms). His definition of America, although it sought improvements, called upon the public to progress under cooperation and called upon the government to do better and produce more creative federalism. The Great Society represented a positive America that worked harmoniously and lifted up all those in need - something sort of like a utopia. In comparison with the views of the Port Huron Statement, this America was still shining but needed some polishing; whereas the SDS viewed America extremely cynically and needing much more than harmony to improve the state of the nation. In comparison with Nixon in the Kitchen Debate, both put America on a sort of a pedestal, but Nixon had nothing negative to say about the way of life in America, when Johnson detailed ways to change for the better.

The differing and ever-changing ideals of American life and freedom have shaped the freedoms, rights, and programs we have in place today, but have also contributed to a severe divide and controversies in the agendas and opinions of different groups, social and political.