

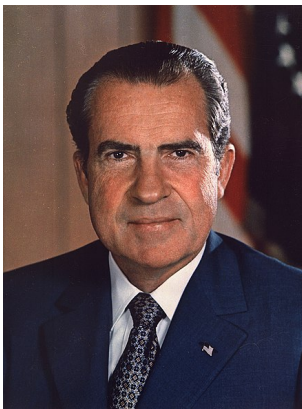


1969

The Year Too Much Changed, Too Fast

By Jerry James

The starry-eyed optimism that had taken hold of America during the mid-Sixties didn't just die in 1969. It was ripped to shreds. — Bud Scoppa



(L) Richard M. Nixon, 37th President of the USA (R) The author, who voted for Nixon in 1968, because his opponent, Hubert H. Humphrey, pledged to follow Lyndon B. Johnson's Vietnam policies. He was drafted into the US Army 8 months later. You may guess his thoughts.

July 1969. A black American soldier in Vietnam looks up at the moon and thinks to herself, “There are men up there.” That image—someone on a mission; far from home in a place she doesn't understand; a place with people who may change by 180° at any moment; but still looking above and beyond it with hope—touches on several of the themes of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, by Ursula K. Le Guin, published in March 1969. These include the Cold War (with hot spots), race, sex and gender, and space, with its promise of *Ad Astra*, the way to the stars.

1969 was the year of:

- The last public Beatles performance and the rumor that Paul McCartney was dead
- Communes and Chappaquidick
- *Easy Rider* and *The Love Bug*
- The first ATM and the occupation of Alcatraz by Native Americans
- The Manson Family and *The Brady Bunch*
- Music festivals at Woodstock and Altamont
- The Moratorium and the Weathermen
- Hamburger Hill and the news of My Lai

Most of these will not be mentioned in the immensely simplified look at the year which follows.

The Cold War



Nikita Khrushchev

Hitler was dead. WWII was over. And almost immediately, the wartime alliance between the USA and the communist regime of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) began to fall apart. On October 19, 1945, George Orwell (who else?) published an essay warning of a “peace that is no peace,”—the Atomic Peace—a permanent “cold war.”

The Atomic Peace was first tested when the People’s Republic of China (PRC) invaded Korea in 1950. (The Chinese communist regime had taken power in 1949.) United Nations forces fought them to a standstill at the 38th parallel. Meanwhile, the USSR took over Eastern Europe with little resistance, barring an East German uprising here, a Hungarian revolt there.

During the 1950s, both sides engaged in political maneuvering around the globe, even as they made cultural exchanges. The Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev grimly promised, “We will bury you.” Then came the Cuban Missile Crisis (1963).

The USSR threatened to install nuclear missiles in Cuba, 90 miles from Florida. Folklore says a steely-eyed President John F. Kennedy stared the USSR down. In reality, he secretly traded the removal of those missiles for the junking of obsolete US missiles in Turkey. The Atomic Peace held.

In 1969, Richard Nixon was inaugurated. He had first won political office in 1946 by smearing his opponent as a communist.

Vietnam

In 1954, the French lost their war in Vietnam (colonized in 1887), to the communists under Ho Chi Minh. The Geneva Accord which followed acknowledged the split of the country at the 17th parallel but sought unification. None of the parties involved ever signed the accord.



Ho Chi Minh

The USSR and the PRC had given aid to Ho. The USA had provided 80% of the French costs—and lost. The lesson learned from this debacle, the Domino Theory, held that communist expansion must be stopped, lest nation after nation fall like dominoes.

A few hundred American troops arrived in South Vietnam in 1955, sent by Dwight D. Eisenhower. Just before his death in 1963, Kennedy increased the number from 900 to 16,000. It was only the beginning.

After the supposed attack on the USS *Maddox* in the Gulf of Tonkin (August 1964), Lyndon Johnson raised the number of ground troops to 125,000. This meant a doubling of the monthly draft calls. Political entanglements and angry demonstrations—“Hey, hey, LBJ / How many kids did you kill today?”—led to Johnson’s decision not to run for re-election in 1968.

Nixon had run on a peace platform while also secretly undermining the Paris Peace Talks. Deliberately presenting himself as a madman, he hoped to bluff the North Vietnamese into an agreement. It didn't work. Vietnam became Nixon's War.

At Woodstock, Joan Baez paid tribute to her husband, jailed for refusing to be drafted. But that December, the first draft lottery was held. Suddenly, perhaps half of male college students no longer had to worry about Vietnam. In 1969, the number of American troops there peaked at c. 540,000.

Of those, 11,780 would die that year. They were far from home, in a place they didn't understand, with an unclear mission. And it seemed as if every Vietnamese they met might at any moment change without warning into their opposite—Viet Cong. The enemy. Late in the year, the news of My Lai broke. There, in 1968, as many as 500 Vietnamese civilians had been deliberately massacred by American troops.

Race



Bobby Seale

At Woodstock, the acts preached peace and love. But non-violence had died with Martin Luther King in 1968. At the Harlem Cultural Festival, "Black Woodstock," Nina Simone spoke-sang a poem. "Are you ready to smash white things, to burn buildings? ... Are you ready to kill, if necessary?" The crowd responded, "Yeah!"

At Woodstock, 3 people died, 2 from drug overdoses. At Altamont, 4 died. One was a black man with a white girlfriend, stabbed by a Hells Angel, a killing caught on film.

The Black Panthers were seen as the most dangerous Black Power group. Chicago police raided an apartment and executed the Panthers' charismatic young leader, Fred Hampton, with two shots to the head.

Although black people comprised only 11% of the US population, combat troops in Vietnam were 23% black.

Bobby Seale, a defendant at the Chicago 7 Trial, might serve as a metaphor for race relations in the US in 1969. He was tried while seated in a chair, bound and gagged.

Sex & Gender



Gloria Steinem

On April 7, 1969, Gloria Steinem published an article, "After Black Power, Women's Liberation." It would be a long time coming, because The Times, They Were a' Sexist.

The birth control pill (1960) had freed women from the heretofore inevitable link between sex and procreation. This led many young men—squares and hippies alike—to pressure young women for sexual favors. Many of those young women gave in to the pressure—and remembered. They would become the foundation of Second Wave Feminism during the next decade.

Some young people went back to the land on communes. Luke Askew (*Easy Rider*) found most of these to be “pretty ugly scenes. They were usually run by 2 or 3 guys on a total power trip, total control over some poor chicks that they ran ragged.”

But California Gov. Ronald Reagan signed a no-fault divorce law, the first of its kind.

And on June 28, a police raid on a Mafia-owned, Greenwich Village gay bar, the Stonewall Inn, went suddenly sideways when the gays fought back—a harbinger.

Space



Neil Armstrong

In 1957, the USSR launched the first manmade satellite, Sputnik. They followed up by putting a man into orbit in 1961. The USA was embarrassed. Kennedy made a belated pledge: “We choose to go to the Moon in this decade... not because [it is] easy, but because [it is] hard.” So hard that it would cost at least 10 lives and put many more at risk.

Despite that risk, at 1:46 PM EDT on July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong sent this transmission. “Houston, Tranquility Base here. The *Eagle* has landed.” After countless centuries, men were on the Moon.

Cold War reminder: The names of the command module (CM) and lunar excursion module (LEM) were changed from *Charlie Brown* and *Snoopy* to *Columbia* and *Eagle*.

Aftermath



The last American soldier left Vietnam on June 30, 1973. The official US war dead total was 58,281. The Atomic Peace holds, but the Cold War (with hot spots)—now waged with successor regimes—continues.

In 2022, US trade with Vietnam was estimated at \$142.1 billion. US trade with China was estimated at \$5.3 trillion.

Because of the draft lottery, the steam went out of student protests, even before the killings at Kent State on May 4, 1970.

Gloria Steinem founded *Ms. Magazine*, a rock of Second Wave Feminism (1972).

That same year, Eugene Cernan became the last man to walk on the moon. *Ad Astra*, the way to the stars, was abandoned.

In May 1974, the American Psychiatric Association ceased terming homosexuality a mental disorder.

Richard Nixon resigned on August 8, 1974.

Jerry James has been working in the theatre for nearly sixty years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director.