**The Counterculture**

**Introduction**

The 1960s were a period when long-held values and norms of behavior seemed to break down, particularly among the young. Many college-age men and women became **political activists** and were the driving force behind the civil rights and anti-war movements. Other young people simply “dropped out” and separated themselves from mainstream culture through their appearance and lifestyle. Attitudes toward sexuality appeared to loosen, and women began to openly protest the traditional roles of housewife and mother that society had assigned to them. Those Americans who were considered part of the **counterculture** included members of the **New Left** such as the **Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)** who protested Vietnam through a Free Speech Movement and young Americans in their late teens/early twenties known as **hippies**. Hippies were mostly middle-class whites but without the political drive. Their hallmarks were a particular style of dress that included jeans, tie-dyed shirts, sandals, beards, long hair and a lifestyle that embraced sexual promiscuity and recreational drugs, including marijuana and hallucinogenic LSD. The sex and drug culture were reflected in the rock music of the time by such groups as Jefferson Airplane and the Grateful Dead and performers like Jim Morrison and Janis Joplin. Although some young people established communes in the countryside, hippies were primarily an urban phenomenon. The Haight-Ashbury section of San Francisco and the East Village in New York were the focal points of the counterculture for a brief period from 1965 to 1967.

**Students for a Democratic Society**

During the 1960s, the political landscape saw the rise and rapid growth of many radical groups, collectively called "The Movement" or the "New Left" (in contrast to the old labor-oriented left or liberal Democrats). A handful of activist groups form the core of the New Left, including the Students for a Democratic Society, or SDS.

The Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) was conceived as an organization intended to establish a strong New Left movement. The New Left was a term used to describe a generation of Americans, mostly college and university students, motivated by social injustices, the war in Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement in the South. In 1962 members of the association met in Port Huron, Michigan and drafted "The Port Huron Statement"-- a document outlining the political tenets of group. In it, SDS criticized the materialistic, discriminating American society and described how universities should be the center of the action to establish a "participatory democracy". In June 1962, fewer than 100 people attend the first SDS convention at Port Huron, Michigan. The group adopted an official political manifesto, the Port Huron Statement, based largely on a draft by Tom Hayden (later of the Chicago Seven).

The Port Huron Statement included the following statements:

“We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit.”

“When we were kids the United States was the wealthiest and strongest country in the world: the only one with the atom bomb, the least scarred by modern war, an initiator of the United Nations that we thought would distribute Western influence throughout the world. Freedom and equality for each individual, government of, by, and for the people -- these American values we found good, principles by which we could live as men. Many of us began maturing in complacency.”

“As we grew, however, our comfort was penetrated by events too troubling to dismiss. First, the permeating and victimizing fact of human degradation, symbolized by the Southern struggle against racial bigotry, compelled most of us from silence to activism. Second, the enclosing fact of the Cold War, symbolized by the presence of the Bomb, brought awareness that we ourselves, and our friends, and millions of abstract "others" we knew more directly because of our common peril, might die at any time. We might deliberately ignore, or avoid, or fail to feel all other human problems, but not these two, for these were too immediate and crushing in their impact, too challenging in the demand that we as individuals take the responsibility for encounter and resolution.”

With regard to the war, SDS ranged itself among those anti-war groups which called for immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops from Vietnam. Rather than view the war as a mistaken decision of an essentially good government, SDS considered it to be a form of U.S. economic imperialism and a means of containing revolutionary change in Third World nations. SDS consequently aligned itself with the National Liberation Front (Vietcong, or South Vietnamese Communists) as allies in the battle against U.S. imperialism.

By 1968, SDS had become the largest and most infamous student radical organization of the 1960s. It had graduated from its initial left-liberal stance to embrace, by 1968, an anti-capitalist critique and revolutionary politics. In 1968, SDS was catapulted into the national spotlight when Columbia University’s SDS faction led an unprecedented antiwar demonstration in which students occupied campus buildings and virtually shut down the school. The protest ended after several days when NYC police were called in. SDS became increasingly divided by factional disputes, the organization collapsed, leaving behind a small faction known as the Weathermen that advocated violent revolutionary action. By the 1970s, the divided SDS eventually faded away.

**Hippies**

The Beat Generation was the precursor to the Hippie movement. This included poet Allen Ginsberg and author Jack Kerouac. The Beat movement was a bohemian counter-culture in its own right and included experimentation with drugs and sexual liberties. The Beat writers began in New York, but most of those who were closely associated with the movement moved to San Francisco, where the Beat Generation of the 1950s would become the hippie movement of the 1960s.

The hippie movement began in California, then spread throughout the United States, Canada and other parts of the world. Most of those in the movement were young, between the ages of 15 and 25, and a saying within the movement was that no one older than 30 should be trusted. While they flocked to California from middle class families, their music, fashion and arts started to influence trends in the rest of the nation.

Those in the hippie movement, often referred to as Flower Children, used the arts in all their forms to communicate their protest of the status quo and "the Establishment." In particular, folk music was the medium the hippie movement chose above all others. The movement gained steam in 1967 with a San Francisco concert kicking off the Summer of Love. Woodstock followed in 1969 with close to 500,000 people attending. In addition to expressing their ideas about sexuality, drugs and authority, the hippies used their music and other art forms to comment on political and social issues --- most notably the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War.

The hippie movement is connected to young Americans' disillusionment with the Vietnam War. The hippies followed a pacifist philosophy and sought to protest the war with non-violent demonstrations, including burning draft cards, sit-ins and protesting at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. The political arm of the hippie movement was called the Youth International Party, or "yippies."

Hippie culture often encouraged dropping out of society because of what it viewed as social wrongs, and the movement was a catalyst for other social movements, including the back-to-the-land movement, environmental movement and the rise of organic farming.

In his 1999 book, "Hippies from A to Z," Skip Stone asserts that the hippie movement did indeed change the world, succeeding as a cultural revolution if not a political one. Among the changes the hippies brought about that are still a part of society today, Stone writes, are sexual freedoms, the environmental movement, humanitarian causes, the natural food movement and a greater acceptance of religious, cultural and ethnic diversity.

**Impact on Society**

The counter-culture challenged traditional norms and demonstrated that youth could have a voice in America as well. During this era, young Americans voiced their protests against the Vietnam War, advanced the cause of feminism, and pushed new boundaries in sexuality and drug use. Most members of the counterculture eventually returned to mainstream society once they reached their late twenties and thirties. Indeed, many would end up working for the same corporations or even the government that they once so adamantly protested. However, their legacy can be found in the numerous young adult activists organizations around the country today.