

AMERICA IN THE 1960s

The course will be an overview of the United States during the decade of the 1960s. The idea for the course is to compare the current decade of American history, which younger people may well think the nadir, with an earlier decade that was at least as bad. For those of us who were adults in the '60s, it seemed an endless series of disasters. The decade began on one of the most profound notes of hope, with the election of John F. Kennedy in November, 1960, although it has generally been forgotten how close and how contested that election was – Richard Nixon had a better argument that the Kennedy victory was “a steal” than Donald Trump in 2020. But amidst the glitz of the Kennedy administration was the Cuban missile crisis, when millions of Americans believed that they might not live to see another day. And then there was the assassination of President Kennedy in November, 1963 – and the emergence of the surprisingly progressive administration of Lyndon Baines Johnson, the Great Society. Johnson’s social and economic program was, in retrospective, the closest the United States had come to a genuine social democracy. But just as Johnson was emerging as a great domestic political leader, he and his leadership team of “the best and the brightest” led the country into the quagmire of Vietnam, which brought an end to Great Society spending and plunged the nation into domestic chaos. Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated; the nation’s major cities were plunged into riot; public racial animosities disrupted the public life of the country, and in 1968 Richard M. Nixon was elected President as the leader of a Republican Party which was now held together by overtly racist policies. If you shared my liberal political sympathies in those days, you were not a happy camper by the end of the decade. It will be worth asking why things went so badly, in the end, in the 1960s.

We will read Kevin Boyle’s *The Shattering: America in the 1960s*, a recent and beautifully written history of this difficult decade. Other relevant books and sources will be recommended. The class format will be a two hour talk, interspersed with relevant videos, and followed by discussion.

Stan Katz is a former professor of public policy at Princeton University, former head of the American Council of Learned Societies. He is a scholar of legal history, constitutional law, and philanthropy.

Mondays from 10:00 a.m. – noon starting February 27 through April 3 for 6 sessions
Virtual — Lecture/Discussion — Unlimited