

History 358
Topic: "America Divided: The 1960s"

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"The torch has been passed
to a new generation..."
--Pres. John F. Kennedy (1961)

"I may not get there with you,
but we as a people
will get to the Promised Land!"
--Dr. M.L. King, Jr. (1968)

No decade of twentieth century American history attracts more controversy even today than the tumultuous, hopeful, troubled, deeply divisive 1960s. JFK, Cuba, civil rights, "Black Power," "Brown Power," feminism, Vietnam, hippies, Panthers, assassinations, Vietnam...for young people in particular it was an era of unprecedented political activism and countercultural experimentation, of utopian dreams often cut brutally short by violent nightmares. This course will not attempt to cover it all—an impossible task—but together we will explore certain features and personalities of the evolving political and cultural atmosphere of those times, when, by 1968, it seemed possible that our country might be teetering on the brink of "revolution"—variously defined, peaceful or otherwise. The goal is to gain a deeper understanding of how the issues, triumphs and tragedies of "The Sixties" continue to affect us decades later.

We will read and discuss four books over the coming months. *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* by Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin (Oxford Press, 1999) presents a good overview of the issues that faced our country during the era, with a special focus on the activism of young people. *Mutual Contempt: Lyndon Johnson, Robert Kennedy, and the Feud that Defined a Decade* by Jeff Shesol (Norton, 1997) is a political drama that takes us to the highest levels of power as two men fought to claim the legacy of a fallen president. *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Free Press, 2000) is the latest in a series of works by Michael Eric Dyson exploring the black freedom struggle, this time asking fresh questions about the career of "America's Conscience." Dr. King, whose challenges to injustice are too often today misunderstood or trivialized. Finally, Charles Kaiser's *1968 in America: Music, Politics, Chaos, Counterculture, and the Shaping of a Generation* (Grove 1988) will walk us step by step through the climactic traumas of the decade.

It is assumed that each student will take seriously his or her commitment to come to class each week prepared to participate and contribute to our discussions. Reading assignments will be given as we proceed, and occupy the center of our attention. Grades for the course will be based upon the following four components:

Class contribution/quizzes:	25%
Midterm exam	20%
Final Exam:	25%
Term Paper	30%

	100%


