

HOMEWORK: The 1970s Overview
American Decades, 2003

Many historians and others dismiss the 1970s as the decade that never happened. They view it simply as the period when the political and cultural trends of the 1960s, that decade of tremendous social change, finally came to an end with the rise of those trends that would come to dominate American life in the 1980s, a decade of style and little substance. Feminism, drugs, progressive education, busing, exotic religions, ethnic politics, long hair, blue jeans, and platform shoes lingered from the 1960s. Conservatism, cowboys, televangelists, flag-waving, energy saving, rising cost of living, Sun Belt shift, cocaine, and acid rain foreshadowed the 1980s.

The 1970s, it seemed, had little to define it, except, perhaps, the N.G. Slater Corporation's ever-present "smile button" (created in 1968). Two black, blank eyes and a wide grin superimposed on a yellow sun, the smiley face was an image found on everything everywhere in the decade: lapel buttons, bumper stickers, T-shirts, wall posters, toilet seats. Blissful, welcoming, and optimistic, the smiley face was the perfect expression for such a traumatic decade. Profoundly shaken, the nation was in the midst of a collective repression, yet it tried to act as if nothing had happened.

1. In what way was the smile button a good representation of the 1970s?

In fact, much did happen during the 1970s. The Vietnam War, the conflict in Southeast Asia in which the United States had been involved since the 1950s, finally came to an end for Americans in 1973. The peace treaty the U.S. government agreed to was little more than a piece of paper indicating an inglorious defeat. The war, fought for so long at such a great cost for so little gain, had divided the country as nothing had since the American Civil War (1861–65). Antiwar protests filled city streets and college campuses, giving rise to an anger that left Americans dead at the hands of their fellow countrymen.

2. How did Vietnam and the eventual resolution of the war impact Americans at home?

While the trauma of Vietnam forced Americans to question the role of their government in foreign affairs, the presidency of Richard M. Nixon (1913–1994) forced Americans to question their belief in their government. Paranoid and secretive, ruthless and distrustful, Nixon had been elected in 1968 on the promise of ending America's involvement in the war. In reality, he escalated it, drawing out the conflict for another four years. He sought to open relations with the Soviet Union and Communist China, but his impressive political skills were forever stained by his desire to control and crush his political opponents. The 1972 break-in of the offices of the Democratic National Committee in the Watergate complex led back to the Oval Office and to the president. Facing certain impeachment for his involvement in the illegal activities, Nixon resigned the office of the presidency on August 9, 1974, becoming the first president in the history of the United States to do so.

3. How did Nixon “force Americans to question their belief in their government”?

Of course, not all famous people during the decade were known because of scandals. Ralph Nader and Cesar Chavez tirelessly defended the interests of U.S. consumers and farm workers. Journalist Gloria Steinem publicized the plight of women with sympathy and intelligence. Donald A. Henderson of the World Health Organization oversaw the eradication of small pox. Muhammad Ali returned from political adversity to become once again "the Greatest" boxer. Billie Jean King used her position as a tennis champion to open avenues for other women to follow.

Such visible, symbolic heroes, however, were the exception in the 1970s. More often, real heroes took a low-key approach to problems, working at the local level for small victories. Typical of such individuals was twenty-seven-year-old homemaker Lois Gibbs of Love Canal, New York, a residential neighborhood near Niagara Falls. When noxious fluids began seeping into basements causing homeowners and their families to fall ill, she organized a grassroots campaign that exposed the area as a toxic waste site. Because of her rallying efforts, the federal government designated Love Canal an emergency area, and the state of New York paid to have residents moved.

4. Beyond the trauma of Vietnam and national politics, many Americans worked tirelessly in the '70s for social change. Provide 2 examples of these heroes and what change they sought.

Unfortunately, many Americans retreated from public life in the decade, preferring one that was more self-involved. Looking good, feeling right, and eating healthily were ritualistic preoccupations of millions during the "me decade." Magazines, paperbacks, pop music, television, and movies were filled with discussions of sensitivity and feelings. Disco, the pulsating dance music that dominated nightclubs across the country, provided many with an escape from the political, economic, and social problems they clearly did not want to face. However, the me decade of the 1970s would give way to the 1980s, a decade preoccupied with glamour and wealth.

5. The 1970s are often referred to as the "Me Decade." What does this mean? DEFINE.

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