

Whether black pragmatists in Atlanta forged their own definition of America or not, *Courage to Dissent* surpasses any study to date in its synthesis of social and legal history to describe the interaction between grassroots protest and legal reform. It sets the bar high for future studies of the intersection between legal history and civil rights.

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James T. Patterson, *The Eve of Destruction: How 1965 Transformed America*, New York: Basic Books, 2012. Pp. 344. \$28.99 (ISBN 978-0-465-01358-6).

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The folk-rock song “The Eve of Destruction,” written by 19-year-old composer P.F. Sloan, and sung by soloist Barry McGuire (formerly of the folk group New Christy Minstrels) proved a smash hit in 1965. Recorded in mid-July, with lyrics reflecting events in the headlines only months earlier (“Think of all the hate there is in Red China/then take a look around to Selma, Alabama...”), by September it was number one on both the Billboard and Cashbox singles hit list. Although the version preserved on a Youtube video has gotten nearly 2,000,000 visits, it was not the most distinguished piece of songwriting of the era (rhyming “coagulatin” with “contemplatin” for example), but it was certainly influential in its own time and place. More a cry of despair than a call to action (“And you tell me/Over and over and over again, my friend/Ah, you don’t believe/ We’re on the eve/of destruction...”), the song was nonetheless regarded by many as the “Marseillaise” of the younger generation. As *Time* magazine commented, “the rallying cry is no longer ‘I wanna hold your hand,’ but ‘I wanna change the world.’”

Brown University emeritus history professor James T. Patterson, who has produced a thick and influential shelf-full of books on twentieth century United States history, sees the song’s release and reception as emblematic of a rapid change in the mood and outlook of the nation in the second full year of Lyndon Johnson’s presidency. The 1960s in some ways only became “the Sixties” of historical memory in 1965 when the civil rights movement both peaked in success and was riven by the emergence of angrier voices in the black community, and the war in Vietnam, simmering along since 1961 just below the level of widespread public concern, was suddenly and dramatically ratcheted up by President Johnson in a desperate attempt to stave off the collapse of the American client regime in Saigon. As Patterson argues, “The tumultuous times that erupted in 1965 and that lasted into the early 1970s

differed greatly from the early 1960s, which, for the most part, were years of political and social consensus that resembled the 1950s” (xiii).

Patterson’s brisk and engrossing narrative reminds the reader that 1965 was certainly a year crowded with memorable events, from the Selma to Montgomery march and the start of “Operation Rolling Thunder” in the spring, to the passage of the Voting Rights Act and the Watts riot in the summer, to the battle of the Ia Drang and the self-immolation of Quaker war protester Norman Morrison in the fall, not to mention the release of the Rolling Stones’ “Satisfaction” and Bob Dylan’s “Like a Rolling Stone.” And by year’s end, a conservative political revival would be taking form that would reshape the American political landscape for the remainder of the twentieth and the first decade of the twenty-first century.

As Patterson acknowledges, he is not the first to consider the singular importance of 1965 in determining the course of the rest of the decade, and beyond; in a 1991 book, journalist Nicholas Lehmann wrote, memorably, that “the 1960s turned as if on a hinge” that year. A “good sixties/bad sixties” dichotomy can be found in many standard narratives of the decade, with the 4 years from John Kennedy’s first inaugural address through the Selma to Montgomery march burnished to a rich golden sheen of nostalgic appreciation, and everything thereafter scored to the soundtrack of *Apocalypse Now*.

Patterson, to his credit, avoids the good/bad dichotomy. His retelling of the events of 1965 is a record, among other things, of the loss of illusion and complacency as well as innocence. Americans would be forced in the half decade that followed to reassess their nation’s role in the world as well as the fairness of their own society at home. The “volatile mixture of restlessness, rights-consciousness, and discord that had first become clearly evident in 1965,” peaked in the years that followed, not all for the good, but not all for the bad either, as Patterson suggests. “While some of these forces,” unleashed in 1965, “enhanced rights, choices, and life chances for previously disadvantaged people, ultimately producing a more just and tolerant society, they also sparked angry controversy and fragmentation” (247). Although the song “Eve of Destruction” is coming up on its fiftieth anniversary, destruction has not yet arrived; however, controversy and fragmentation have become our national default setting.

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