O'ER THE RAMPARTS

Summer 2025

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Welcome to the Summer 2025 issue of O'er the Ramparts – something to keep you thinking about all things American Studies over the long-awaited summer break.

This issue kicks off with a "call to arms" for those interested in American Studies as we enter the second quarter of the twenty-first century. Our new BAAS Chair, Dr Michael Collins, argues that American Studies is more important now than ever, giving us a lens that enables us to 'cut through the confusion and chaos and see clearly what is happening'. As Collins also notes, many of the challenges that face the world in 2025 parallel those of the mid-twentieth century, and our Keywords section takes us back to that period. Unpacking some of the key terminology used by scholars of the Cold War, Dr Jennifer Chochinov helps clarify concepts such as the "Global Cold War" and "Third Worldism," whilst overviewing developments in recent historiography that have expanded and reimagined how we understand the Cold War as a whole.

The next piece in this issue is from school-based educator Tom Carter, who draws us back a little further to the turn of the twentieth century and the Progressive Era. Calling for us to consider this period in as much depth as the subsequent world wars and Cold War, Carter argues that the Progressive Era's legacies as a force for both 'liberation and oppression' mean that it a period that should not be overlooked as much as it frequently is in school and university history curricula.

We have a full section on the latest BAAS News, where in particular we congratulate the impressive students who won Awards at this year's ceremony, as well as the winner of the Barringer/Monticello Teacher Award. In doing so, we also treat you to glimpses of the fantastic American Studies work taking place in our UK secondary schools and Sixth Form Colleges by providing short extracts from the four prize winners in our BAAS School Essay Awards. As always, we would urge you to encourage colleagues and students to enter these competitions later this year when they reopen. The section also includes further details on the upcoming BAAS School Conference, which will be held in central Manchester on 17 October 2025. Please do reserve this date for you and your students to attend what will be an all-star line-up of American Studies academic talks (with a slant towards history and politics) before the school calendar gets too full!

Following this, Professors Desmond King and Rogers M. Smith provide invaluable analysis to the new racial battle lines emerging in contemporary US politics. For those inspired by what they say here, see King's Leonard Schapiro Lecture, which was published earlier this year in the journal *Government and Opposition*: https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2024.33. The issue is rounded out by Dr Andrew Fearnley, who offers a view of US civil rights between the 1980s and 2010s, an important period in the history of that subject, and one covered in several subject specifications, but where materials and perspectives have been in short supply.

BAAS BRITISH ASSOCIATION FOR AMERICAN STUDIES

CHAIR'S WELCOME

As the new Chair of the British Association for American Studies, I have been invited by the editors of this newsletter to reflect on the role played by the study of the US in this age of crisis, uncertainty, and authoritarianism. At this moment, it is clear that the value of our teaching and study has perhaps never been greater, nor our methods more essential. The daily bombardment of grim news from the US can leave us all feeling defeated, deflated, and without means to resist. We see this in our students and our friends. Distraction and confusion are the objects the Trump Administration pursue. So, we have never needed more to understand clearly the threat the world faces and to help others do the same. Like the good historians we are, Americanists should take a lesson from our history.

This year, BAAS turned 70. As such, it is a moment when members and supporters are joining together to reflect on the origins of British American Studies: its purpose, its goals, its value in the world. American Studies was born in the aftermath of the Second World War. At that time, promoting the study of the US largely meant attempting to turn universities and schools on to topics of enquiry that could provide people with the tools necessary to help solidify the resistance to fascism; to promote innovative, alternative, interdisciplinary methods of reading and teaching that would try to help ensure the allure of authoritarianism never again found a foothold in Europe; and to refresh the public sphere with new ideas and energy.

When I speak of "American Studies" I do not just mean the degrees or courses that were founded by that name. I mean the entire concept of the intellectual study of the US in all forms. It is easy to forget that for all its influence over the nineteenth- and twentieth- centuries, in 1955, the USA was a topic hardly deemed worthy of study in Britain. People were looking away, distracted by their commitments to older cultural norms and ideas and unable to see the opportunities that the study of American cultural life might give, and the threat that the new superpower might present. A deep aversion to American material was set into the bones of European and British cultural life. American culture was deemed trash—an inadvertent way of defending the products of Britain and its empire. This was a dangerous trap. Anti-Americanism means a failure to engage and so, ironically, to seek to find a means to check the growth of American power or reroute its course. Cultural supremacy of any kind (British, European, American) is as dangerous as confusion.

British American Studies was born therefore with three goals: to imagine an alternative way to be in the world; to develop topics of study that did not reinforce supremacist notions of the place of British and European Empires in school and university curricula; and to hold this new, U.S. superpower to account. American Studies was developed to resist the feeling of exhaustion, despair, and relentless inevitability that they felt then, and that we feel now. It urged us to be on our guard. To see what lay behind American promises, and to investigate the history of our own.

Since its founding as a discipline, American Studies scholars have debated how close the project of American Studies needed to be to the postwar US state. Looking back at our historical documents, we have always been uncomfortable with the perception that studying the US meant endorsing the activities of those in power. This was not our vision and when naysayers attack us with that claim (as they are wont to do) it is worth remembering. The original members of BAAS took an early decision to maintain official independence from the US Embassy. We chose instead to maintain the position of being what I like to think of as a critical friend. We could be British in a different way by neither falling prey to easy anti-American attitudes, nor endorsing without question the paths this world power might take. We would not be complacent, and we would not be complicit.

As we face again challenges that parallel the condition of the world in the mid-twentieth century, it is all the more important that as scholars, students, and teachers of American Studies we redouble our efforts to be ever more what we were made to be, what the founders of our discipline saw for us. They may not have predicted absolutely the MAGA movement, the opposition to DEI, the closure of borders and the persecution of minorities we now witness daily, but with their interdisciplinary methods they did seek to give us a lens through which to cut through the confusion and chaos and see clearly what is happening. With this view we can help others, in Britain, the US, and elsewhere, who face oppression. When governments rule by confusion, the first task of resistance is clarity.

Michael Collins is Reader in American Studies at King's College, London, and the new Chair of the British Association for American Studies.

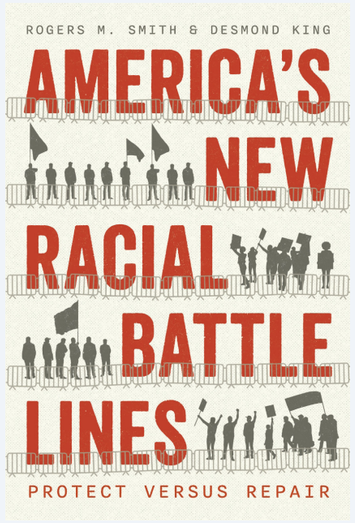
CROSSING BOUNDARIES

AMERICA'S NEW RACIAL BATTLE LINES

In our book America's *New Racial Battle Lines: Protect Versus Repair* we explain how recent policies and political divisions about racial equality in the US have centred on a dichotomy between policies designed to protect white Americans' interests and identity versus policies designed to repair historical legacies of inequality experienced by African Americans. This 'protect' versus 'repair' division has been at the centre of US politics in the twenty-first century and has been galvanized by the presidential elections of Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012, and MAGA leader Donald Trump in 2016 and 2024. These two presidents represent radically different racial policy alliances, and reflect the division which, we argue, is polarizing voters and lawmakers.

PROTECT VERSUS REPAIR

Protect versus repair racial policy alliances have displaced the earlier alliances of 'colour-blind' versus 'race-targeted' that were dominant from the passage of civil rights reforms in the 1960s through to the 2010s. During these five decades the US Supreme Court made many decisions diluting civil rights laws in respect to voting rights, affirmative action, the racial integration of schools, and minority hiring quotas for employers. In 2013, the Supreme Court seriously weakened America's 1965 Voting Rights Act with its *Shelby v. Holder* decision, removing requirements that named states receive prior approval from the US Department of Justice before changing their rules about voting eligibility and districting. In 2023 the Court made a further landmark ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* (and the companion case, *Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina)* declaring that race-based affirmative action schemes in undergraduate university admissions are illegal because they violate the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.



HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY

In previous work we have demonstrated how divisions about racial equality dominate American political development. Two traditions sat together in the US Constitution: a radical progressive egalitarian transformative tradition committed to equal right for all; and a conservative ascriptive white supremacist tradition committed to hierarchy. The dichotomy between these two traditions structured racial politics for over two centuries, initially as a division between defenders of enslavement versus abolitionists (1787-1862); proponents of legal Jim Crow racial segregation versus anti-segregationists (1870s-1960s); advocates of individualist colour-blind policies versus active policy advances for race equity (1970s-2010s). In the current period, this division is organized between defenders of white Americans' interests and opponents of affirmative action (Protect) versus advocates of radical reforms to policing, health and wealth inequalities, and a programme of reparations (Repair).

NEW POLICY ALLIANCES

In the book we use a range of sources to map the Protect and Repair policy alliances including conducting a large number of interviews with representatives of the conservative Protect and progressive Repair movement activists and NGOs, and studies of local, state and federal policies linked to global developments. This research enables us to map the memberships and the aims of the two rival racial policy alliances, made up of grassroots activists, NGOs, and government agencies. We document the huge amounts of funds donated by wealthy individuals and foundations to support both alliances.

These alliances offer divergent visions of America. Protect is focused on protecting whites whom they believe have been discriminated against since the 1960s. Getting the Supreme Court effectively to end affirmative action is a huge triumph for this racial policy alliance. By contrast, repair is focused on addressing the enduring inequalities in health, employment, education, income and housing that remain despite the passage of sixty years since civil and voting rights laws were enacted. The demands of the Movement for Black Lives articulates continuing concerns about criminal justice and economic equality.

Rogers M Smith is the Christopher H. Browne Distinguished Emeritus Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania. Desmond King is the Andrew Mellon Professor of American Government at the University of Oxford. Their book, *America's New Racial Battle Lines* (Chicago University Press) was published in May 2024.

KEYWORDS

Credit: Bill of Rights Institute / Public domain. Uncle Sam's growth from toddler to giant of the world stage.

Towards the end of twentieth century, new debates emerged in the field of Cold War history. Diverting away from previous questions of blame and guilt, scholars increasingly interrogated where the Cold War took place, when it began and ended, and who its primary architects and actors were. Within these categories, they developed innovative and field-defining concepts. What initiated this new wave of thinking (and rethinking) about the Cold War was a debate, in the main, between historians Anders Stephanson and Odd Arne Westad about when and where the Cold War took place, as well as what qualifies as Cold War history.

US IDEOLOGICAL PROJECT

Anders Stephanson argues that the Cold War was an American ideological project manufactured by the US to achieve global hegemony. Anderson argues that US policy makers were aware that the Soviet Union lacked the material resources to represent any kind of true global competition, yet nonetheless manufactured and exploited anxieties of a Communist takeover to justify US expansionist objectives and solidify its position of world leadership.

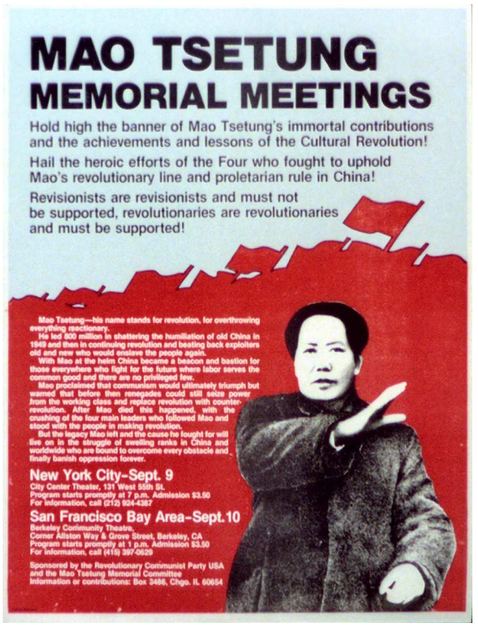
Stephanson places the Cold War as an ideological project in the hands of US policy makers, who relied on longstanding notions of Manifest Destiny, anxieties about freedom undersiege, and that a truly free world could exist whereby the moral principles of the United States were embraced and practiced by all. Stephanson asserts that the Cold War began in 1947, when the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan aimed to isolate the Soviet Union, and ended in 1962, after the Cuban Missile Crises rendered nuclear war a price neither the side was willing to pay. Lastly, he locates the Cold War in Europe, where the Marshall Plan enabled the US to root its global expansionist agenda and hegemony.

GLOBAL COLD WAR

In contrast to Stephanson, historian Odd Arne Westad considers it impossible to reduce the Cold War to an 'American project', to limit its location to Europe, to frame it within a restrictive timeline, and to prioritise US policy makers. Instead, Westad argues that the Cold War be conceived as a battle between conflicting ideologies—American liberal-capitalism and Soviet communism—which played out most prominently from the 1970s onward as the conflict moved from the Global North to the Global South. It is within the Global South, in particular Africa and Latin America, where proxy wars and competitions over Soviet development and Western modernisation took place. While Westad does concede that the early phase of the Cold War may well have been 'an American project,' he stands firmly against overlooking the disparate and complicated ways that the Cold War unfolded from the post-war era and beyond. Rejecting a US-centric view, Westad insists we incorporate diverse temporal, geographic, and topical perspectives to truly comprehend the Cold War.

MAOISM

Julia Lovell's *Maoism: A Global History* (2019) offers another globalist perspective, arguing for the importance of China's Maoist ideology. Lovell examines the Sino-Soviet split and illuminates how the rift between the two nations placed Maoism against Soviet communism—creating an additional layer of rivalry, and a further ideological schism. By spotlighting themes such as decolonisation efforts within the Global South, intellectual inspiration, and women's liberation, Lovell argues that to overlook the lasting impact of Maoism offers an incomplete understanding of the Cold War.



Mao Tse Tung Memorial Meeting, c1976. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, POS 6-US, no. 302.

NON-STATE ACTORS

A cultural turn in Cold War scholarship has led many scholars to 'decentre' prioritising the state and state actors in their accounts, and instead to pay attention to the lives of non-state actors. Non-state actors are those who do not officially represent the state, and might include ordinary citizens, groups, or organisations that operate independently from the government (although they may act in accordance with the wants of the state). One example of such work is found in Fabio Lanza and Jadwiga E. Pieper (eds.), *De-centring Cold War History: Local and Global Change* (2013). In this anthology, scholars argue to expand our conception of the Cold War beyond the domains of state politics and diplomacy, and to offer a more nuanced understanding of the intersection between lived experiences, politics, culture, and ideology. Doing so allows us to rethink how and why people lived and acted as they did during the Cold War. Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht's (ed.) *Decentering America* (2007), similarly draws together a group of scholars who argue that the United States, as a nation, should not hold the spotlight as the primary historical actor of this subject. Instead, they argue that international and transnational histories should be understood not only through the interaction of nations, but also through the actions of public and private organisations, individuals, and through the shared transmission and reception of culture.

THIRD WORLDISM

Third Worldism refers to countries within the Global South that sought to create their own identities and allegiances, beyond the US and Soviet Union. In the anthology *Latin America and the Global Cold War,* edited by Stella Krepp, Thomas C. Field Jr., Vanni Pettinà (2020), scholars identify how attention to struggles within Latin America from the 1960s reveals new modes of identity and cultural, political, and ideological expression. Moreover, they argue that the experience of the Cold War was significantly different in the Global South than in the West, in large part because the proxy wars fought between those superpowers made the Cold War much more actively hot in these regions. These proxy wars shaped the lives of those in many emerging Global South nations, where the realities of political incarceration, assassinations, and violent massacres transcended mere ideological schisms. At the same time, however, Global South nations also experienced a distancing from the Cold War, and crafted their own ideologies, which were beholden neither to strictly capitalist nor communist politics.

Jennifer Chochinov is lecturer in US History and Culture at the University of Manchester

NOTES FROM THE BLACKBOARD

RECONSIDERING AMERICA'S PROGRESSIVE ERA

Flag announcing Lynching, NAACP headquarters. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

America's Progressive Era, sometimes dated between 1890 and 1914, was characterised by the belief that the federal government could and should drive the development of society and the individual. This period exerted a significant pull on much of twentieth-century US politics—either through its influence, or in reaction to it. Yet it often features only briefly in curricula, and its legacy can appear as a series of disconnected "freak waves" rather than part of a deeper historical tide. Understanding the Progressive era is essential to understanding political developments in the US across many of the decades that followed. In spite of this, it is rarely taught explicitly by teachers, and students sometimes approach the era without understanding the political undercurrents of the period.

Today, 'the progressives' are often shorthand for left-liberal politics in the US. This oversimplifies the term: at its core, American progressive reform meant using federal power to reform society, rather than relying on individual or market-led change. Anti-trust legislation, such as the Sherman (1890) and Clayton (1914) Acts broke up monopolies to protect competition, while the Pure Food and Drug Act (1906) mandated accurate labelling to protect consumers—passed partly in response to Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), with its grotesque description of slaughterhouses, as well as earlier laws like the Bottled-in-Bond Act (1897), which had allowed whiskey manufacturers a certificate of quality if they followed similar guidelines. The government would make businesses responsible, by carrot or by stick.

Yet progressive reform also extended into more troubling territory. Influenced by eugenics and "scientific racism," many states implemented forced sterilisation of people deemed unfit to reproduce—including the disabled, the mentally ill, and prisoners. By 1930, thirty US states had sterilisation policies. The Supreme Court upheld those policies in the *Buck v. Bell* (1927) decision. During the same period, interracial marriage was criminalised—not only in the South, but in states such as Washington (1909) and California (1913). These laws were motivated by the same desire for racial "purity" that drove the 1924 Johnson-Reed immigration restrictions. Prohibition was one of the most notable examples of progressivism, being introduced by the 18th Amendment and enforced through the Volstead Act of 1920. This can be seen as a progressive reform: it removed personal choice from the private sphere and framed federal intervention as a tool for moral and social improvement.

Though its political peak dipped in the early 1920s, the issues that animated progressives endured, as did the movement's own approach to those issues. Many early Black civil rights leaders embraced progressive values. Several were prohibitionists—Frederick Douglass once remarked that "the cause of temperance alone would afford work enough to occupy every inch of my time" if he were not a civil rights activist. Booker T. Washington, in 1908, noted his belief that Black Americans were safer in areas that had already implemented Prohibition. Furthermore the early civil rights movement was influenced by the progressive model of using federal power and state institutions to drive social change. Landmark cases such as the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and *Loving v. Virginia* (1967), as well as federal legislation like the Civil Rights Act (1964) and Voting Rights Act (1965), followed this blueprint of using courts and federal authority to reshape society.

American progressivism would also influence perhaps the most destructive events of the twentieth century. American progressives exerted an influence on the nascent Nazi Party, for example. Hitler himself identified the work of American writer Madison Grant, in particular his The Passing of the Great Race, as a personal Bible, with its arguments favouring eugenics and racial segregation. Furthermore, the sterilisation policies of the pre-war Nazi government were broadly similar to those of US states at the same time: both nations had mass sterilisation strategies, and policies enforcing segregation, promoted by false concepts of eugenics and scientific racism. What is notable was the Nazi use of the state to enforce these policies, rather than indoctrinating people into choosing this themselves, another legacy of America's Progressives.

Finally, progressivism would shape the conservative movement that came to dominate the US Republican

President Woodrow Wilson and anti-trust legislation, 1914. Courtesy of the Berryman Political Cartoon Collection, National Archives.

Party from the 1960s on, both in endorsement of progressivism's values and in backlash to it. The Christian Right of the 1980s took inspiration from the moralism of earlier progressives, believing that the state should endorse moral agendas. Similarly, much of the debate about alcohol in the 1910s was reflected in later discussions of family breakdown in the 1980s: that a lax federal government had permitted self-indulgent behaviour, leading to social decline. The moral strains of progressivism were repeated in Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, which mirrored the language of reform in its calls for conservative traditionalism.

American Progressivism has a complex legacy. The movement's faith in reform and belief in the state, shaped, either in endorsement or opposition, several schools of thought in the US and parts of Europe for several decades after. Approaching the Progressive Era in this way, offers students a chance to see how some political ideas are evolutions of existing thought, rather than sharp breaks with the past. Students can, through learning about the actions of America's progressives, recognize these reformers as both a source of liberation and oppression, as well better understand the continuing debate surrounding the role of the state in liberal democracies.

Tom Carter is Head of Social Sciences at Jane Austen College in Norwich.

BAAS NEWS

PRIZE WINNERS

Many thanks to all of those who took the time to enter our BAAS competitions for schools this year. Firstly, we would like to congratulate Michael Saunders of Notre Dame High School, Sheffield, who was awarded the Barringer/Monticello Teacher Award, which will see him head to Thomas Jefferson's former home in Monticello, Virginia, to develop a series of lessons alongside several US-based educators.

We are also pleased to say that 2025 has once again seen an increase in submissions to our two BAAS school essay competitions, showing that engagement with American Studies is definitely on the up! Please do encourage your students to enter an essay, as the variety of topics is what makes it so exciting for our judges – and this year they were very impressed with the overall quality of the entries.

The 2025 School Essay Award was won by Marcie Greenwood of Xaverian Sixth Form College, with a thoughtful piece on LGBT+ citizens in the Cold War and beyond, titled "Did the 'Lavender Scare' ever calm?". In a close second, an honourable mention was awarded to Gavin Austin of Brighton College, with his piece on Donald Trump's first electoral success, titled "To what extent was the political rise of Donald Trump in 2016 due to the weaknesses of his opponents?"

The 2025 School Essay Award for BIPOC Students was awarded to Aleena Hamid of William Hulme's Grammar School, with her impressive interdisciplinary piece, "A relationship even the poets could not break down: assessing how media influenced and shaped countercultural movements during the late 20th century in the USA". An honourable mention was also awarded to Aanya Apte of St Albans High School for Girls, for an insightful assessment of Puerto Rico's past and future, titled "The 51st State: Should the US allow Puerto Rico to have statehood?"

The range of topics covered by these four winners only scratches the surface of this year's submissions, but these pieces stood out for the clarity of their arguments and their use of a broad range of sources. Edited introductions from the winning pieces are provided below to give you a flavour of the winning entries:

OVERALL CATEGORY WINNERS

Marcie Greenwood – Did the 'Lavender Scare' ever calm?

US Republican senator Joseph McCarthy was famous for his fearmongering, yet baseless, tactics to feed the hysteria of a communist threat in America's government. However, McCarthy had also fanned flames of repression of gay communities that grew more systematic, more harmful, than the 'Red Scare' ever did. The persecution of people who behaved in a way that could be even vaguely perceived as homosexual created severe job insecurity for federal employees, sent the press into a frenzy, and exacerbated suspicions amongst the population. Throughout years of facing discrimination and marginalisation, many gay/lesbian people in an immense variety of jobs and in every state were left traumatised.

Those in federal employment faced even more threats as their private lives were frequently monitored and investigated and if one had their private life found out, the government would use it as blackmail, which tabloids would then exaggerate. By 1975, when the Civil Service Commission created rules that ended the restrictions on gay or lesbian people to act in federal employment, an estimated 8,000 people (National Park Service, 2024) were already directly fired from such jobs as part of these laws, and potentially several more as some resigned so as to not be exposed. In addition to the homophobia displayed by the public, the effects of this mass hysteria impacted the nation. However, over 500 anti-LGBTQ+ bills were introduced in the US in 2023 alone (Choi, 2024), so did the Lavender Scare ever end?

Choi, A. (2024). 'Record number of anti-LGBTQ bills were introduced in 2023', CNN, January 22.

Available at https://edition.cnn.com/politics/anti-lgbtq-plus-state-bill-rights-dg/index.html

(Accessed 30 November 2024)

National Park Service (2024). 'Executive Order 10450: Eisenhower and the Lavender Scare',

October 25. Available at https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/lavenderscare.htm#:~:text=An%20estimated%207%2C000-

10%2C000%20federal%20employees%20were%20fired%20or,Lavender%20Scare.%20Ex

Aleena Hamid – A relationship even the poets could not break down: assessing how media influenced and shaped countercultural movements during the late 20th century in the USA.

The symbiotic relationship between counterculture and media is dynamic and has acted as a driving force in shaping societal values and norms. The key root of counterculture has been to subvert the grand narrative, giving marginalised groups a way of forming new identities that they truly resonate with and relate to. The use of counterculture forces us to assess the power structures within traditional media and how a heavily censored view is often internalized, becoming mainstream. Counterculture is reliant on media to amplify its message and unifying lost voices into a community that feels seen. Simultaneously, media platforms can capitalize on the novelty and freshness of counterculture in comparison to the hackneyed and trite commercial culture of the time. Not only has media reflected and reshaped counterculture but this symbiosis has played a key role in redefining political, social and cultural landscapes as well as propelling the visibility of counterculture movements. This essay explores how different countercultural movements utilised media to galvanise support and spread their ideologies during the 20th century, whilst also revealing the drawbacks of a countercultural movement being reliant on media.

HONORABLE MENTIONS

Gavin Austin – To what extent was the political rise of Donald Trump in 2016 due to the weaknesses of his opponents?

In November 2024, Donald Trump won a second term as President of the United States, cementing his position at the centre of both the Republican Party and American politics at-large. His rapid emergence to the forefront of politics eight years ago, culminating in his victory in the 2016 Presidential Election was highly unexpected and understanding it remains a complicated endeavour to this day. Several key factors have been used to justify his rise to power in 2016, such as the effectiveness of his political campaign, particularly concerning his use of the media and his selection of his running mate, and the general dissatisfaction with establishment politics in the final years of the Obama Administration.

However, what ultimately was responsible for Trump's election in 2016 was the fact that the opponents he faced, both in the Republican Primaries and in the Presidential Election, were plagued by several weaknesses, ranging from the email scandal that doomed Hillary Clinton's campaign, to the complacency of traditional Republicans during the primaries. While the other factors certainly played a role in bringing Trump to power in 2016, it was the weaknesses of his opponents that created the space for Trump to establish himself as an anti-establishment candidate in contrast to the mainstream Republicans and Democrats, and provided him an area on which he could focus his media campaign.

Aanya Apte – The 51st State: Should the US allow Puerto Rico to have statehood?

> "Statehood is going to happen. It is the logical next step in our political future as Americans."1 – Jenniffer González-Colón

Since the acquisition of Puerto Rico as a US territory in 1898, the island's ongoing quest for statehood to escape its current situation as a modern-day colony, with its people having the title of citizens but receiving partial rights and benefits, is yet to prove fruitful. The resident commissioner of Puerto Rico, Jenniffer González-Colón, declared the appointment of Puerto Rico as the 51st state as a natural progression in the advancement of American democracy as the current disenfranchisement of Puerto-Rican residents affects not only government policy towards them but also harms the perception of Puerto Ricans more widely.

... [It] is undeniable that the importance of Puerto Rican contributions to the US is a crucial part of the history and national future of the US. However, Puerto Ricans still remain disenfranchised, often justified on the basis of tax inequalities. Whilst Puerto Ricans that only earn income from sources within Puerto Rico are not subject to US federal income tax2, they do pay the same taxes in federal Medicare, social security, self-employment, unemployment, customs, and merchandise as US states. However, this measure directly violates the foundation upon which American democracy is built; taxing Puerto Rico without offering it substantial representation – essentially making it a modern-day colony. Puerto Rico only has a non-voting resident commissioner representing them in Congress. This lack of voting representation in the legislative branch, means that the 32.1 million residents of the United States' most populous territory continue to be subject to US laws and policies without any representation.

1 https://gonzalez-colon.house.gov/media/press-releases/jenniffer-gonzalez-defends-puerto-ricans-vote-statehood

2 https://www.irs.gov/taxtopics/tc901

AN AGE NOT AN ADMINISTRATION

US CIVIL RIGHTS, 1980-2010s

US civil rights history, one of the most studied topics at A-Level, features prominently in all modern American history specifications, and, unusually, is the focus of two devoted exam board modules. In all these forms, the subject is notable for its chronological breadth, with students invited to explore US civil rights from the mid-nineteenth through to the turn of the twen-ty-first century (OCR's specification runs 1865-1992, and Edexcel's from 1850-2009). This is a known challenge, especially as resources, intellectual cohesion, and student interest start to thin after reaching the subject's apparent high point in the late 1960s, following the passage of the Johnson Administration's landmark legislation. How should teachers make sense of this subject in the final third of the twentieth century? What should anchor discussion once the dependable weight of America's civil rights movement recedes from view?

Exam boards encourage teachers to discuss US civil rights in the years from the 1970s through to the early 2000s as a strand of each presidential administration. We need to resist this approach, which clouds interpretation and makes the subject less coherent. Instead, we should think about the decades from the 1980s to the 2010s as a distinct historical period, when civil rights took on a new shape. It would help if we found a name for the period. We might call it, a 'court-led counter-revolution'. Of course, students should know who occupied the White House at a given moment and recognize how those incumbents shaped public discussions of race, or how enthusiastically they enforced legislation. But as former federal prosecutor Paul Butler writes, it is also important to remember that 'cops shoot and beat up African American men regardless of who is in the White House.' Indeed it is crucial we emphasize that these were not years when racial discrimination vanished. 'We have not ended racial caste in America,' the lawyer and civil rights activist Michelle Alexander points out, writing about these decades, 'we have merely redesigned it.'

There are three main features that organized civil rights activity in these decades, and that mould them into something like a distinct era. Firstly, the main site of debate about civil rights shifted to America's courtrooms, congressional committees, and federal agencies. It was principally in these settings that the major wrangling took place, as judges, lawyers, and senior bureaucrats debated how the laws and rules passed a decade or more earlier should be interpreted, implemented, and enforced in US society. That this shift happened alongside the resurgence of conservative forces in American politics is also of relevance. The political scientist Steven Teles tells us that it was in the mid-'80s that a 'conservative legal movement' sprung up in Washington, DC, with connections into law schools and think tanks, and with a grasp of 'complex administrative mechanisms, judicial rule-making and appointments.' It is from these conservative networks that we can trace contemporary figures, such as Edward Blum, the architect of the recent Students for Fair Admissions cases.

President Ronald Reagan signing Martin Luther King, Jr, Day into law, 1988. Courtesy Ronald Reagan Presidential Library

The 1980s ushered in a new phase in American civil rights, in part because of President Ronald Reagan's inveterate opposition to such enactments, which as activist Mary Frances Berry charged, 'turned back the clock' on the issue, breaking with previous presidents' acceptance of such legislation. But the Reagan administration also exerted an influence over the direction these debates would take beyond its time in office, because of those it advanced to positions of influence. Notable among those were John Roberts and Clarence Thomas, both of whom later ascended to the US Supreme Court, and now serve as chief and associate justices. Both Roberts and Thomas were instrumental in weakening civil rights legislation during these decades, and, in the case of Thomas, have remained outspoken in their opposition to policies intended to correct historic injustices. Viewed across the longue durée, the *Shelby County vs Holder* (2013) decision, which demolished the Voting Rights Act, and the *Students for Fair Admissions vs. Harvard* (2023), which effectively ended affirmative action, are the culmination of the political and legal opposition that swelled in these decades.

If the main arena of civil rights debate now moved to America's courts, then a leading source of those discussions was America's system of criminal justice and policing. Mass incarceration was the second feature that defined this period, and the one that Michelle Alexander has called 'the most damaging manifestation of the backlash against the Civil Rights Movement.' Between the late 1970s and 2010s, the US incarcerated more people than any other advanced democracy. Today, approximately 5 million people are within America's criminal legal system, around 2 million of whom are persons of colour. Mass incarceration was quickly recognized as an issue of racial justice, indeed became a leading edge of the movement. In 2019 Black Americans comprised one third of the US prison population (compared with 14% of the US population), and more than half of those serving life sentences. Of course police-community relations and state violence were concerns for earlier generations of civil rights activists and organizations, but it was only in these decades that they became preeminent ones, and 'police violence' and 'mass incarceration' only entered the vocabulary of US commentators and activists in the early 2000s. These terms gave shape to a growing swell of civil rights organizing in the 2000s, periodically fanned by smartphone footage of particular incidents of police brutality, and which served as scholar Barbara Ransby has reflected, as 'the catalysts for the upsurge in Black resistance' in the 2010s, including the formation of groups like Black Lives Matter.

One way that activists and their allies in these decades spotlighted the impact mass incarceration was having on communities of colour was through the production of new cultural works, including Ava DuVernay's Netflix documentary *13th* (2016). Such productions capture the third element that defined civil rights in these decades, which was the fact it played out in a new media landscape, which reframed the profile of US race relations, and created a new optics around discrimination and social justice. From the Bush campaign's Willie Horton ad in 1988, to the hand-held camera footage of the beating of Rodney King in 1991, the audio of the controversial arrest of Henry Louis Gates Jr in 2009, to the smartphone videos of the killing of Eric Garner in 2014 and Walter Scott the following year—new media technology transformed how and where debates about American race relations happened, and who consumed and acted on those productions.

'Social media has removed the filters that used to protect white America from what it didn't want to see,' the African American essayist Darryl Pinckney wrote in 2016. But this new media landscape also adjusted how critics of civil rights have spoken about the issue, and many of the terms of active resistance got refreshed in these years. Starting in the 1980s Republicans began to express opposition to civil rights politely but effectively using what political consultant Lee Atwater called abstract words, speaking in the codes of 'cutting taxes' or 'criminalizing welfare,' rather than 'states rights', while contemporary conservative advisors, such as Christopher Rufo, seek to rally the MAGA base with new terms, such as 'critical race theory'—which Rufo calls 'the perfect villain'—to fire up indignation and political action against all critical treatments of race in US history or contemporary society.

The history of US civil rights between the 1980s and 2010s constitutes a significant and distinct period, and it is a subject best viewed not through the distorting lens of presidential administrations, but the clarifying one of an age.

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NOTICE AND EVENTS

The 2025 BAAS Schools Conference will take place on Friday, October 17 in Manchester at Central Methodist Hall, Oldham Street, M1 1JQ. The conference will include papers relevant to those studying the US within A-Level History, and Government and Politics modules, and will offer more general reflections on contemporary US politics, including the subjects of trade and tariffs; the relationship between Congress and the Presidency; civil rights in the C21st; and the role of the Supreme Court. Further details, including a full programme and ticket information, will be made available on the BAAS website in early September.