



The Eve of Destruction: How 1965 Transformed America

James T. Patterson

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Of all the changes that have swept across America in the past century, perhaps none have been as swift or dramatic as those that transpired in the 1960s. The United States entered the decade still flush with postwar triumphalism, but left it profoundly changed: shaken by a disastrous foreign war and unhinged by domestic social revolutions and countercultural movements that would define the nation's character, politics, and policies for decades to come. The prevailing understanding of the 1960s traces its powerful shockwaves to 1968, a year of violent protests and tragic assassinations. But in *The First Year of the Sixties*, esteemed historian James T. Patterson shows that it was actually in 1965 that America truly turned a corner and entered the new, tumultuous era we now know as "The Sixties." In the early 1960s, America seemed on the cusp of a golden age. Political liberalism, national prosperity, and interracial civil rights activism promised positive change for many Americans. Although the nation had been shocked by the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and the 1963 assassination of President Kennedy, America's fundamental traditions and mores remained intact. It was a time of consensus and optimism, and popular culture reflected this continuity. Young people dressed and behaved almost exactly as they did in the 1950s, and if the music and hairstyles of the British Invasion worried some conservative parents, these concerns were muted. At the beginning of 1965, Americans saw no indication that the new year would be any different. In January, President Johnson proclaimed that the country had "no irreconcilable conflicts." Initially, events seemed to prove him right. The economy continued to boom, and the overwhelmingly Democratic Congress passed a host of historic liberal legislation, from the Voting Rights Act to Medicare and Medicaid to expansions of federal aid for education and the war on poverty. But Patterson shows that, even amidst these reassuring developments, American unity was unraveling. Turmoil erupted in the American South and overseas in the spring of 1965, with state troopers attacking civil rights demonstrators in Selma, Alabama and American combat troops rushing into Vietnam to protect American interests there. Many black leaders, meanwhile, were becoming disenchanted with nonviolence, and began advocating instead for African-American militancy. That summer, as anti-war protests reached a fever pitch, rioting exploded in the Watts area of Los Angeles; the six days of looting and fires that followed shocked many Americans and cooled their enthusiasm for the president's civil rights initiatives, which—like his other "Great Society" programs—were also being steadily undermined by the costly and unpopular war in Vietnam. Conservative counterattacks followed, with Republicans like California gubernatorial candidate Ronald Reagan—and even some disillusioned Democrats—criticizing the President for mismanaging the war and expanding the federal government past its manageable limits. As Patterson explains, this growing pessimism permeated every level of society. By the end of 1965 the national mood itself had darkened, as reflected in a new strain of anti-establishment rock music by artists like the Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, the Grateful Dead, and Jefferson Airplane. Their songs and lyrics differed dramatically from the much more staid recordings of contemporary acts like Frank Sinatra, Julie Andrews, and the Supremes, reflecting an alienation from mainstream American culture shared by an increasing number of young Americans. In *The First Year of the Sixties*, James T. Patterson traces the transformative events of this critical year, showing how 1965 saw an idealistic and upbeat nation derailed by developments both at home and abroad. An entire generation of Americans—as well as the country's politics, culture, race relations, and...

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