1. The assassinations of 1968

The year 1968 had been one of the most traumatic in American history since the outbreak of the Civil War.

- **4 April 1968.** Assassination of Martin Luther King in Memphis, Tennessee.

- **5 June 1968.** Assassination of Attorney General Robert Kennedy (brother of JFK), who, of all politicians, was the most committed to the continuation of the Great Society, and to further advances in Civil Rights. When President Johnson had announced in March that he would not be seeking re-election, many Democrats looked to Robert Kennedy.

2. The Democrats Divided

(i) The impact of Vietnam

Since 1965 the war in Vietnam had been absorbing the attentions of President Johnson, and increasing quantities of the national wealth. Soon, commitments in Vietnam overtook the Great Society as Johnson’s primary political objective.

- Furthermore, the spiralling costs of Vietnam brought about increased taxation and inflation, damaging the economy and reducing the tax revenue that could be invested in the Great Society.

- In spite of the rhetoric of Pres. Johnson and Defence Secretary Robert Macnamara, the vast escalation in men and expenditure appeared to yield little more than steadily increasing numbers of American casualties.

- By the time of the Tet Offensive of 1968, key figures in the American media were publicly arguing that Vietnam could not be won, and this translated into a considerable reduction in support for President Johnson.

- In March 1968 President Johnson announced that he would not seek re-election for a second term.

(ii) The 1968 Democratic national convention

The divisions within the Democratic Party were graphically illustrated by the riots that accompanied the Democratic Party National Convention. This had been fuelled by a combination of anti-Vietnam protests, and by the tensions within the city of Chicago over race and policing. Moreover, that summer witnessed massive popular demonstrations in many first world cities, such as Paris.

- **Senator Eugene McCarthy** ran for the Democrat nomination on an anti-war ticket, challenging Johnson’s Vice-President, Hubert Humfrey, who was committed to the continuation of the war. A third challenger was George Wallace, the segregationist Democrat governor of Alabama, who stood for election as an Independent.

- The riots outside the Democrat convention, which were dispersed by Democrat Mayor Daley using water cannon and live ammunition, were broadcast around the world. The convention chose Hubert Humfrey as the Democrat candidate.
3. The 1968 election

- Republican Richard M. Nixon gained 301 electoral college votes compared to 191 for Democrat Hubert Humfrey. The popular vote was closer, 31.8 million to 31.3 million.
- George Wallace (Democrat, governor of Alabama), standing as an independent, gained 10 million votes.

II. THE NIXON AND FORD PRESIDENCIES

Background

Although a liberal on race issues in the 1950s, by the time of his election to the presidency he had become opposed to much of what the Civil Rights movement stood for. He identified the movement with lawlessness, radicalism and opposition to conservative values. Under Nixon the FBI was used to suppress the Black Panthers, as he regarded them as a subversive organisation.

- “... there has never in history been an adequate black nation and they are the only race of which this is true.”

Unlike Kennedy and Johnson, Nixon saw no value in meeting with black leaders, and he had no personal rapport with Ralph Abernathy (leader of the SCLC). Nixon was opposed to the idea of MLK’s birthday becoming a US national holiday.

1. Voting Rights and Integration

Nixon believed that the legislation on voting rights has gone far enough, and he opposed the strenuous enforcement and implementation of the 1965 law.

- When Nixon was standing for President, he promised that, should he have the chance to make appointments to the Supreme Court, he would nominate those who would follow the “strict construction” of the Constitution. This meant that he would not be seeking to use the constitution to give federal legal force to the extension of civil rights.
- In 1970 he nominated the racist Judge Harold Carswell of Florida to the Supreme Court.

2. Nixon’s attitude towards Affirmative Action (Positive Discrimination)

Nixon had an ambivalent attitude towards affirmative action. He was opposed to the idea of strict quotas, as he felt that these were discriminatory.

However, Nixon did see some value in the programme:

- If affirmative action could help the lives of some black Americans, it might reduce the tension in the black communities in the inner cities.
- Nixon also hoped that affirmative action might help to break the alliance between the unions and the civil rights leaders.
- He also hoped that, in spite of opposition from the leaders of the civil rights movement, ordinary black Americans might benefit from affirmative action, and begin to vote republican.

First introduced to state programmes in October 1969, affirmative action was then applied to construction industry unions in the major northern cities. Forcing the labour unions to adopt quotas was intended to open up the more skilled construction jobs to black Americans.
• In 1971 the Supreme Court heard the case of *Grigg v. Duke Power Company*, and ruled that affirmative action was lawful and constitutional.

### 3. Affirmative Action in Education

Education became the most important battleground for *affirmative action*.

(i) **Background**

In spite of the passage of Civil Rights legislation, many schools were *de facto* segregated, meaning that all of the pupils were from the same poor black ghettos, while white children went to schools in their own, more prosperous neighbourhoods.

The Federal Education Department, and the district school boards, felt that this segregation could only be tackled by bussing white children to “black” schools, and vice versa.

(ii) **The State of Mississippi**

In 1969 Secretary for Health and Education Robert Finch demanded that unless Mississippi desegregate its schools, it would lose federal funding.

Senator James Stennis demanded that the policy be reversed, and Pres. Nixon requested that Secretary Finch ask the Supreme Court to suspend the integration of education. The *Supreme Court* demanded that Mississippi should comply without further delay. However, Nixon did not use Federal power to further the process of school desegregation in Mississippi.

(iii) **The State of N. Carolina**

Nixon’s experience with the Mississippi case encouraged him to avoid involving himself in conflict between the Supreme Court and the states.

In 1970 a North Carolina judge ruled in favour of bussing in the state, and the result was white southern anger against the courts, but not the President.

(iv) **The President and the Department of Health & Education**

The civil servants of the Department of Health and Education felt that their work was being undermined by the President, who publicly distanced himself from affirmative action, and who played for support with the Southern States.

• In early 1970 125 of the department’s staff resigned in protest against the President’s attitude.

• **Nixon clarified his position, stating his support for desegregation, but his opposition to quotas and bussing.** Nixon’s main concern was not to upset potential voters in the southern states.

(v) **Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education (20 April 1971)**

Under Chief Justice Burger, the Supreme Court ruled that, in order to equalise access to education, and to prevent *de facto* segregation, it was constitutional and lawful to bus black children to schools in predominantly white neighbourhoods, and vice versa. **Result:** this gave constitutional force to *bussing*.

• Bussing became the greatest single point of conflict within the educational desegregation issue, and would be contested in various levels for courts over the following two decades.

In 1975 the Supreme Court heard the *Miliken v. Bradley* case, which allowed the white Detroit suburbs to be exempt from a city desegregation plan.
(vi) Opposition and Resistance to Bussing

The bussing of children into schools where they would form a small minority of the school roll was very unpopular with parents, especially whites who wanted their children to be educated in single race schools.

- 1974, Restore Our Alienated Rights (ROAR) was established in Boston to oppose the bussing of white pupils to schools in black neighbourhoods.

(vii) The impact of positive discrimination in education policy

- By 1971 only 34% of black students remained segregated in predominantly black colleges.
- By the autumn of 1972 44% of black students in the South were in predominantly white schools.

4. Nixon and Black Enterprises

(i) Background

During the Johnson presidency, the government had ordered investigations into the social conditions in black neighbourhoods.

- The 1965 Moynihan Report had come as a response to the Watts riots.
- On 29 July 1967 President Johnson had established the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder, headed by the governor of Illinois, Otto Kerner.

(ii) Nixon’s attitude

Whereas Johnson had emphasised the use of state-funded projects to improve the lives of black Americans, Nixon was ideologically opposed to “creeping socialism.”

- Nixon believed that the future of the black community depended on the growth of black businesses, to create local economies where black people employed each other and exchanged goods and services.
- The Minority Business Enterprise was established to channel government funds and loans to assist in the setting up of black owned businesses.
  - Nixon later claimed that during his presidency government investment in black businesses increased from $200 million to $472 million.
  - Also that the tax receipts generated by black owned businesses grew from $4.5 billion in 1968 to $7.2 billion in 1972. (This helped to justify his view that state money should only be invested if could benefit the entire economy).
  - He also claimed that two thirds of the top 100 black companies were established during his presidency.

(iii) The results of Nixon’s policies on Black Capitalism

Nixon hoped that his policies would create a successful black middle class that would vote Republican. However, he was over-optimistic in this, and did not realise that such policies would not always succeed, and that positive results would probably only materialise in the medium-term.

- Nixon’s strategies did not deliver the black votes that he hoped for. However, he did secure re-election in 1972 with the majority of Southern White votes, following the withdrawal from the race of George Wallace, after an assassination attempt that left him crippled.
5. The achievements of the Nixon period

- **On 9 August 1974 President Nixon resigned**, following the discovery of secret tape recordings that incriminated him in the burglary of the Democrats’ campaign headquarters in the Watergate Building in June 1972, and in the cover-up that followed. *Nixon was succeeded by his Vice-President, Gerald Ford.*

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<tr>
<th>Positive Achievements</th>
<th>Areas of Controversy</th>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Desegregation continued under Nixon, even though he was opposed to forcing white communities to accept the process.</td>
<td>✓ Nixon was very concerned to maintain the white conservative vote in the South, which he had won from the Democrats. He frequently spoke out against Civil Rights in public.</td>
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<td>✓ Although Nixon was opposed to <strong>bussing</strong>, it continued and expanded during his presidency.</td>
<td>✓ Black leaders regarded Nixon as the most negative President on Civil Rights since Truman.</td>
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<td>✓ <strong>Affirmative action</strong> continued, in spite of the President’s personal opposition.</td>
<td>✓ Pres. Johnson attacked Nixon’s entire domestic policy, arguing that he was dominated by big business, and an enemy of “The Great Society” project that Johnson had inaugurated.</td>
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<td>? Nixon claimed the credit for the decrease in black American families living below the poverty line in the early 1970s. However, this could also be accounted for by the fact that blacks were gradually sharing in the longer term trends of growing prosperity across the board. This point remains open to debate.</td>
<td>✓ Black unemployment was twice that of the level experienced by white people.</td>
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<td>? Conservative critics of Nixon inside the Republican Party argued that he was no better than Johnson, and that he was stifling the economy by spending too much federal money on state projects.</td>
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