THREE AMERICAN TRIBUTARIES OF THE COUNTERCULTURAL FLOWS

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Abstract: The current study aims at capturing several important American voices in the 1950s and 1960s, contributing to that age's dynamism and ideological polyphony. Some of the texts and voices that contributed to the emergence of what can be considered the countercultural ethos of the mid sixties and early seventies can be traced further back into the previous decade, with Allen Ginsberg's Howl featuring prominently. Heller's novel Catch-22 and Kesey's One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest, published in the early 1960s, will complete here the inevitably incomplete pattern of the defining culturescape of the age. These three artistic landmarks will also be considered here as three tributaries to what will, a few years later, turn to be the mighty American countercultural river, in which rebellion and nonconformism pose serious challenges to a mainstream culture of indulgent consensus.

Keywords: *counterculture, baby boomers, the Beats, the military industrial complex, MAD*

The postwar years up to the early 1970s featured reassessments of important aspects of cultural identity for large segments of the new generations coming of age at that historical time, both in Europe and in the United States. For many people, including scholars, defining what culture is all about became increasingly difficult. A perspectival competition unfolds between seeing culture as, first and foremost, a repository of the cultural heritage, on the one hand, and, completely differently, as a critical cultural engagement with the past and with the present. This latter approach as an extreme view features culture as an arena, as a site of struggle. This makes one tempted to associate a certain perception of what will be called the counterculture with the approaches of a new critical inquiry which gained prominence in the 1950s and 1960s – cultural studies. May one call the approach, in the contexts which will be explored below, countercultural studies?

A sensible, balanced view would consider culture as a site of both continuity and change, involving not only consensus, a horrible word for many these days, but also dialog, negotiation, confrontation. A more dramatic view, highlighting disjunctions, clashes and collisions encourage descriptions which are particularly appropriate when considering the revolutionary trends and movements of the late 1950s, the 1960s and early 1970s in America, but also in many parts of the world, involving not only Western Europe, but also the countries across the Iron Curtain.

Given the complexity and vastness of the cultural panorama of those years and the limited space of a reasonably limited essay like the present text, the focus will be laid on a limited number of texts that capture the voices in that age's ideological polyphony. Some of the texts and voices that contributed to the emergence of what can be considered the countercultural ethos of the mid sixties and early seventies can be traced further back into the previous decade, or even decades. Almost always can one doing serious research on one particular topic or issue discover earlier and earlier intimations and influences that might turn one limited body of work into something almmost unmanageable in a scholar's lifetime.

One may see the emergence of the counterculture as a relatively natural phenomenon, largely due to the coming of age of America's most massive generation of teenagers and young adults coming of age around 1965; the baby boomer generation turned out to be an important social segment, a force to be reckoned with, and its members became fully aware

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of this. They had to assert their identity in relation to the world in which they had grown, and their perceptions of it were all but positive.

The wide geopolitical context in which their adult lives were supposed to unfold was provided by the grim prospect and far from great expectations of the Cold War. About two decades before, Winston Churchill, while visiting America, had delivered his famous speech that announced the fall of the Iron Curtain and the beginning of the Cold War, with such far from encouraging for humankind episodes as the West Berlin blockade (1948-1949) and the building of the Berlin Wall (1961), which physically divided West and East Berlin, and ideologically and politically Eastern and Western Europe. The Iron Curtain was now complete, and the race between capitalism and so-called Communism (more properly defined as totalitarianism) began. Among the most noticeable components of this race were the arms race and the space race, two developments from which, apparently paradoxically, the American Establishment drew its remarkable strength.

As the Second World War had turned the United States into the savior of the free world and the hope of humankind, the prevailing war narrative was still largely Manichean, a confrontation between pure good and pure evil. The Korean War at the beginning of the 1950s did not appear to change that perception that many American shared. However, things began to change, as the 1950s turned into a more complicated decade.

Allen Ginsberg attracted a lot of attention in 1957 with the publication of his long poem *Howl*, while Kerouac's novel *On the Road,* as well as his theorizing about the beatitude of the Beat experience, led to the emergence of what will be called, because of the handful of friends that the two authors shared, 'the Beat generation.'As Ginsberg was coming from the New York area, where Kerouac himself had begun his beatific explorations, and had come over to California, he will supply, as already stated, the link between the seeds of the counterculture on both sides of the US. The most outstanding event in the prehistory of the counterculture and a key event of the West Coast literary life was the famous Six Gallery reading of Ginsberg's poem, *Howl*, in San Francisco on October 7, 1955. The impact on the nonconformist audience was tremendous, but so was the conservative response to the event, to the poem, to the poet. The trial which ensued promoted *Howl*, gradually turning sudden notoriety into enduring fame. Ginsberg became a countercultural icon *avant la lettre*.

Not only will Ginsberg's 'artistic exploitation' of the creative insights offered by the uncharted territory of altered states of consciousness bordering on insanity, the connection with the divine, encourage his ranking within a Romantic tradition, but it will also herald some of the developments of the countercultural age, an age that will consider *Howl*'s author as a founding father and herald in many ways.

Before his adoption as a guru of the rebellious 1960s psychedelic experience, Ginsberg was also considered the artistic linchpin connecting two geographically remote, but closely related literary groups. These were the New York Beats and the West Coast poets of the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance, both groups heralding the rebellion against social conformity and materialism of the 'conformist' 1950s, dominated by what Sitkoff had referred to as 'the silent generation' (Sitkoff 33). The prevailing conformism of the early postwar age, largely fed by America's thriving economy and attending prosperity had many adherents, but also its notable discontents, among whom Ginsberg will feature prominently both in the 1950s and in the decades of the counterculture. His journeys of initiation, as well as those of his fellow poets, involved alcohol, free sex, but also the beatific realms of Zen Buddhism boosted by the psychedelic experience facilitated by pot and LSD. All this will be taken over and disseminated throughout the incredibly large generation of baby boomers that will dominate the years of the counterculture.

Ginsberg's *Howl* may be considered the central Beat poem and the 'secular Annunciation' of the countercultural ethos. Itpromotes spontaneity and intensity of feeling,

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its heralding of a Romantic revival being, at the same time, the foreshadowing of the spirit of the psychedelic strain of the following years. In his introductory lines to the poem, William Carlos Williams presents Ginsberg as a *poète maudit* with visionary power and a broad, an all-inclusive poetic range: 'This poet sees through and all around the horrors he partakes of in the very intimate details of his poem. He avoids nothing but experiences it to the hilt"[1] .

It combines visionary insight with confession and detailed exploration of what is perceived as the surrounding all-too-real squalor of contemporary experience. The opening lines of the poem lament 'the best minds of Ginsberg's generation,' which, as it will be seen, announce the equally best minds of the hippie generation of the 1960s. These are, obviously, the representatives of what will be called 'the Beat generation, the group of visionary, nonconformist figures: 'acid freaks' or 'crack heads,' gay people, tramps wandering across America.

The long catalog of their lifestyle announces the countercultural slogan which will be promoted by Timothy Leary in the years of the following decade: 'turn on, tune in, drop out.' These are such experiences as expulsion from university (one way of dropping out), familiarity with mystical Oriental texts, the wandering across America, to Mexico, drug addiction, life in squalid, communal places.

What follows in the second section of the long poem announces some of the bugbears illustrating the mainstream culture of consumerism and materialism and its accompanying Establishment, supported by what Eisenhower will soon call the 'military industrial complex.' In Ginsberg's poem it is evoked in the shape of Moloch, the prevailing sphinx of cement and aluminum, whose mind is pure machinery driving a soulless jailhouse, fed and supported by oil, stone, electric power, banks, skyscrapers. The poet deplores the alienation forced upon him by this all-powerful monster.

The most important immediate features of the context in which the counterculture became prominent in the US and in the Western world were provided by the early 1960s. The 1960 Presidential elections showed an apparently abrupt transition between two decades and two very distant generations, from an old leader, Dwight D. Eisenhower, to the second youngest president ever, John Fitzgerald Kennedy. The October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the hottest episode of the Cold War, had brought the world, for the first time in history, to the brink of a universal Holocaust. Many people began to see war in the nuclear age as more than a clash between villains and heroes clad in shining armor. Madness became a metaphor for many things such as bureaucracy and war, and the Establishment supported, quite indirectly, such a view by an officially-sanctioned theory about military deterrence: MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction).

It is not therefore accidental that madness, which had featured prominently in Beat culture, will become associated with the insanity and altered states of consciousness that the counterculture will deal with, either derogatorily (the madness of war, of the Establishment and its bureaucracy) or questioningly (who is sane and who is insane in the cuckoo's nest, the link between psychedelia and enlightened madness), an issue that Michel Foucault will engage with in his explorations of the cultural constructions of madness across the ages. Two novels engaging with madness in creative ways may be seen as a link between the predecessor of the counterculture, Allen Ginsberg, the contrasting cultural context in which he had created and published *Howl*, and the subsequent years which, like Ginsberg's text, will turn *Catch-22* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* into countercultural *livres de chevet*, the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Thomas Weed Whissen is among those critical voices which connect *Catch-22* with the subsequent context of America's involvement in Vietnam and of the emergence of the

[1] A. Ginsberg. *Collected Poems 1947-1980.* New York: Harper & Row, 1984, pp.811-812.

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countercultural nay-sayers, a context which turned this novel into the ultimate pacifist tract (55).

Catch-22 was published in October 1961, one year before the above mentioned hottest episode of the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis. However, Heller had started writing the book as early as 1953, in the conformist, though problematic 1950s. The early 1950s meant, politically speaking, the insanity of McCarthyism in America, but also the emergence of the Theatre of the Absurd (Beckett's Waiting for Godot, 1952). Meaninglessness and the absurd appear to be blowing in the air, before Bob Dylan would come up with his countercultural message.

Catch-22 is an anti-war novel, but much more than that. Its broad satirical scope covers history, politics, and big business. It seems that Heller worked very hard to create an overwhelming, chaotic picture, while at the same time getting this apparently chaotic pattern to achieve specific effects in the wake of the emerging Absurdist Weltanschauung of the age.

"It was love at first sight. The first time Yossarian saw the chaplain he fell madly in love with him."[2] Thus begins the novel, and it takes some time before the reader realizes that Yossarian is not gay. The pointless beginning will turn out to have its point at the end of the novel, when the chaplain, having shown increasing signs that he is losing faith in the God of an absurd universe, gives his blessing to the last in a series of Yossarian's 'insane' decisions.

An Air Force captain, the protagonist is a combat pilot in an American military unit stationed on the island of Pianosa during World War II. When the novel begins, the protagonist has already flown 44 missions, more than the required number prescribed by the command of the Twenty-seventh Army Air Force. However, Colonel Cathcart, the squadron head, wants to distinguish himself by means of his men's bravery, that is, by getting them to fly more combat missions, and occasionally getting them killed in the process.

Yossarian's main concern, it turns out, is simulating madness in order to be discharged. He will learn, to his dismay, what *Catch-22* means and does from Doc Daneeka, the squadron physician. In order to avoid flying more missions, Yossarian is told, one has to plead insanity. Since trying to avoid flying is a sign of mental sanity, one who does so is far from insane. This is the zany rule that will provide a structural device for the book. Heller will manage to create a large number of catch-22 situations, but also weaving them together in a comprehensive pattern.

Yossarian gradually rises in terms of moral stature from the initial cowardly figure of an anti-hero to that of a hero in his own right. It is in the last-but-one chapter, which, because of it being another analeptic narrative leap, chronologically occurs before the other events of the book, that the gruesome details of the circumstances of Snowden's death during one of the combat missions are revealed. It is only now that Yossarian's previous madness can be rationalized, and a number of his crazy gestures going back as far as the first chapter are correctly understood as a response to a hostile, meaningless world. Will Yossarian find and choose the means to survive by learning the rules of the system surrounding him?

Considering him a troublesome individual that they had better get rid of, Colonel Cathcart and colonel Korn find an unusual way of doing so. They will offer Yossarian a deal. In exchange for promotion to the rank of major and an honourable discharge, in defiance of 'catch-22,' all Yossarian will have to do is "like them" and support them for a very short while. He will decline the offer, aware that he is now opposing a hostile system in which his former friend, Milo, is a major player. To accept the deal would mean to become the accomplice of an unjust system, thus confirming its authority. The protagonist is also reminded of the significance of the scene of Snowden's death, the secret that he learnt at

[2]J. Heller. *Catch-22*. London: Vintage, 1994, p.13. Parenthetical page number references within the text will refer to this edition of Heller's novel.

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great cost. Looking at Snowden painfully dying, his bloody entrails scattered all over the plane floor, Yossarian had found Snowden's grim secret about the human condition: once the spirit is gone, man is garbage (554).

But Captain Yossarian's spirit is not gone, and he refuses to be garbage. He will survive following his own way of escape, choosing to run to Sweden, as a defector, rather than to go back home as a major and war hero. Supported by Major Danby and the chaplain, he will break free on his own terms, and his gesture is more than desertion, showing the true courage of a hero, as Lupack notes: 'Choosing not simply to survive but to act morally by refusing a world that is immoral, for the first time Yossarian demonstrates true courage as a hero' (59). Behind him, the chaplain will persevere at no longer being too nice to everyone, any time. Yossarian's friends have got a message that they will try to convey.

The fact that the protagonist finally assumes a moral position of authority within the novel enables the reader to see *Catch-22* as an effective satire, delivered from a definite moral vantage point, on the pointlessness and absurdity of most of the substance displayed within it. Thus Heller's rebel figure that heralds the countercultural ethos also acquires the moral dignity of heroes of other, less ironic, ages.

As for Ken Kesey, his temperament and experience turned him into an outlaw figure and a link between the Beat Generation of the 1950s and the counterculture movement of the 1960s, for which he became a sort of cult character, sometimes with almost disastrous effects. It all happened on the strength of his critically acclaimed, best-selling novel, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962).

It is at Stanford University, California (where he had enrolled in a creative writing program in 1958) that Kesey met Vik Lovell, a graduate psychology student who helped him get into the world that would inspire him for his best known work. Lovell told him about the research on experimental drugs, such as LSD, being conducted at a veterans' hospital. As doctors were looking for paid volunteers ready to be experimentally drugged, Kesey chose to get both a sum of money and an opportunity to explore alternative modes of perception.

The success of *One Flew…* was considerable, even financially, considering the massive print runs: the book sold more than eight million copies over the first three decades of its publication. Kesey bought property in La Honda, California, adding to his entourage Beat figure Neal Cassady, Kerouac's eccentric friend and model for Dean Moriarty, the character in Kerouac's cult Beat novel *On the Road,* as well as an odd mix of such people as pacifist, hip, Flower Power, Beat poet Allen Ginsberg and bellicose, aggressive Hell's Angels types.

He also bought a school bus which he and his Merry Pranksters painted in vivid colors, fitted with audio equipment and movie cameras, additionally loaded with comic books and a wide range of drugs, and, Kerouac style, hit the road, going across the States all the way to New York. Kesey had turned into a genuine counterculture person who thought at the time that writing had become an old-fashioned and artificial form. He was trying to turn his own life into a work of art, looking for new forms of perception, organizing happenings and taping them as part of "The Movie," craving new mystical drug experiences.

The fact that *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* soon became 'cult fiction' in the United States is largely due to the central theme it features. This theme was gaining considerable currency among the 'psychic outlaws' of the 1950s and 1960s, and will become even more prominent when the general conformism of the two above-mentioned decades is followed, in the late Sixties and early Seventies, by the rebelliousness of the counterculture: it shows a determined individual at odds with the strict rules of society taking a heroic stance… and losing in a blaze of glory. As George Searles puts it, 'in its righteous anger, its rejection

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of authority, and its celebration of irrepressible nonconformity, Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is certainly a book of its time.'[3]

The book is dedicated 'to Vik Lovell, who told me dragons did not exist, then led me to their lairs.' It sounds intriguing, but when linked to another statement made by the narrator of the novel, it makes sense. The half Indian Chief Bromden, the character-narrator, is recounting the story of his stay on a psychiatric ward, focusing on the 'advent and crucifixion' of Randle Patrick McMurphy, the glamorous protagonist. The Indian is aware that the readers will think he is 'ranting and raving,' and that the story looks 'too horrible to have really happened,' 'too awful to be the truth,' adding 'But it is the truth even if it did not happen.'[4] This truth that did not happen points to the book's remarkable symbolic and metaphoric load, that gets interwoven with other aspects of the novel, such as characterization, thematic structure, narrative perspective. The structure of the book is reminiscent of the narrative formula of such books as Melville's *Moby Dick* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. The narrator appears to be a secondary character who witnesses the exploits of the protagonist and learns something about himself in the process. The question whether Chief Bromden is a secondary character or as central to the story as McMurphy is open to interpretation.

The Big Nurse, the 'boss' running the ward, turns up, appearing to the readers through the narrator's perspective. The tips of her fingers, like her lips, rather than suggesting traditional feminine features, are seen as the color of 'the tip of a soldering iron'(4). Her hand bag is seen as a tool box, devoid of such 'woman stuff' as lipstick or compact. It contains 'a thousand parts she aims to use in her duties today – wheels and gears, cogs polished to a hard glitter, tiny pills that gleam like porcelain, needles, forceps, watchmakers' pliers, rolls of copper wire…'(Ibid.).

One thing Chief Bromden is paranoid about is what he calls the Combine: a vast machine organization controlling every individual both inside and outside the asylum, in which the Big Nurse is a powerful and dreaded figure, a combination of authoritative Big Mother, monster, implacable machine, ready to crush any sign of disobedience. The Indian is afraid of real and imaginary electronic and mechanical devices, such as mikes in his broom handle or even in the pills he is taking. The Indian thinks that the hospital is just a 'factory' of the Combine, and its inmates are mechanical parts that are defective, and therefore needing repair.

Bromden's feigned deafness and dumbness is meant to isolate and protect him from the others. Initially, like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Bromden felt that it was society that made him silent and invisible, turning him into a non-entity. His deaf and mute status also allows the Indian to overhear and report, as a narrator, exchanges that the hospital staff would otherwise keep from him. Assuming deafness and dumbness, Bromden accepts a less-than-human subservient position in the hospital, the Indian deliberately diminishing, belittling his presence. Gradually, with McMurphy's assistance, Chief Bromden will see himself grow up again, and regain his prodigious strength. Kesey appears to use the stereotype of the Indian as innocent child who must be educated and improved by his white father figure character, but the novelist uses it far from condescendingly, in order to convey his meaning in a narrative in which the torch is passed on from a nonconformist to one learning to follow in his mentor's path.

[3]G.J. Searles. "Introduction." *A Casebook on Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* . G.S. Searles, ed. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992, p.1.
[4]John Clark Pratt, ed. *Ken Kesey: One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Text and Criticism*. New York: Penguin, 1996, p.8. Parenthetical page number references within the body of the text point to this edition of Kesey's novel.

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McMurphy first appears as an adventurer, gambler, troublemaker, who finds a way of escaping the rigors of the prison work camp, where he is serving his sentence for assault and battery. Feigning insanity will bring him to the mental asylum, where he hopes to relax, take it easy, earn money by gambling. He socializes, shakes hands and jokes with Chronics and Acutes alike, appears to be delighted to be in an 'Institute of Psychology.' Knowing how to put the inmates at ease, he first tells them that they don't look that crazy to him (although they should). He then demands to meet the person who 'claims' to be the craziest, apparently to arrange a combat for the title.

Randle McMurphy will use his leading position to challenge the rules and the head nurse's authority. At first he does it just for fun, just to entertain himself and the other inmates. The gambler in him urges him to bet that he will make Nurse Ratched lose her cool. The latter, from the very beginning, 'coolly' sees him as a 'manipulator,' and her comments on him as a potential troublemaker on the ward she is firmly running make one think of political agitators and revolutionaries outside, within a 'permissive'(democratic?) society. McMurphy will soon realize the terrible, humiliating ways in which the Big Nurse uses therapy not in order to treat and cure patients, but in order to keep them under control, while making them feel vulnerable, dependent, childish. During group meetings, for example, the patients are in turn asked to reveal embarrassing details of their lives, and the rest are encouraged to figuratively tear them to pieces in a cruel game designed by the nurse to divide and control the inmates.

McMurphy will first urge the patients to regain their self-esteem, self-confidence and sense of solidarity. He will manage to get a majority of patients to dare and vote against Miss Ratched, who everybody is in awe of. He will drag twelve of his 'disciples/ apostles/ followers' onto the great fishing cruise that will allow the patients to act, enjoy freedom, have a good time, assert themselves as resourceful and dignified people (it is worth noting that out of the twelve, there are ten insane male inmates and two female prostitutes). He will get Chief Bromden to discard his deaf-and-dumb mask and start communicating with him, gradually and symbolically transferring to the Indian part of his power. As a result of the relationship between the two, the Indian also becomes more articulate about the problems he has to face, and he remembers more vividly the problems his race had to contend with. Bromden will grow courageous enough to intervene in a fight between McMurphy and the orderlies, when he knows only too well that the two of them are outnumbered and will be overpowered by the men of the Combine. The Indian will join his mentor, the two going together to the electro-shock treatment room for punishment. Significantly, Bromden returns from the EST room alone, and welcomed as a hero by the other patients. This is in anticipation of the moment when McMurphy will leave his 'disciple' alone, by then ready to deal with the Combine on his own terms. Barry Leeds not only finds that the Indian is McMurphy's best pupil, he is the survivor that combines the strengths of his mixed heritage:

> Bromden's is McMurphy's most successful disciple. It is not until the very end of the novel, however, that it becomes clear that Bromden has surpassed his teacher in the capacity to survive in American society and to maintain personal identity in spite of the Combine.[5]

Two major character oppositions are central to the novel, McMurphy vs. Miss Ratched, the Big Nurse, and McMurphy vs. Chief Bromden. The Freudian triangular relationship Mother (Ratched) – Father (McMurphy) – Son (Bromden, but also some of the other patients) combines the two oppositions. It has to do with another important theme of the novel, concerning the way individual freedom is shaped. The patients/ children depend for guidance on strong adults/ parents. While the Mother figure is overbearing and intimidating,

[5]B.H. Leeds. *Ken Kesey*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1981, p.42.

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making mental illness even worse, McMurphy, "the good father," urges the patients/children to show initiative and face challenges and the absurdity of a mechanistic, authoritarian society gone crazier than the crazy world of "the cuckoo's nest."

When Chief Bromden sees his hero turned into a helpless creature, as a result of the lobotomy he has undergone, he makes a terrible decision. Out of love, he chokes McMurphy while he is asleep, and thus preserves the man's dignity. Being reminded by Scanlon of McMurphy's failed attempt to lift the control panel, he summons his huge physical strength, lifts the huge piece of equipment, uses it as a battering ram to break out of the asylum, and manages to do what his role model wanted to do: to fly over the cuckoo's nest. Bromden thus manages to carry out his friend's mission, and carry on McMurphy's role in the world outside, defying the power of the Combine. Chief Bromden regains his pride and identity, combining what is best in his mixed cultural heritage.

Bromden is, like the novel's author, the link between the more solitary nonconformists of the 1950s to the more numerous and vociferous baby boomers of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the ones who, in addition to psychedelic experimentation, got involved in militant protest movements against what they considered a much too conformist mainstream America. Stephen Tanner is one of those who confirm such a place that Kesey's characters and his best-know novel assume in America's cultural history, preceding the countercultural movement with its revolt against established authority (Tanner 161). Like the works of the other two authors dealt with in this article, Kesey's best-known novel may be seen as one of the main literary tributaries of the vast cultural/countercultural river or flood of the mid 1960s and early 1970s. That river left an almost indelible mark on America's subsequent decades.

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