

James Patterson, *The Eve of Destruction: How 1965 Transformed America*.

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The history of the 1960s shows the tremendous speed with which change can take root in America. We find ourselves in a dramatically different environment than the transformative sixties, and it is hard to capture the feeling on that period in a book 50 years later. Most of all, it is hard to capture the sense of urgency and possibility that were the dominant currency of that period. However, this is exactly what James Patterson achieves in his most recent work, *The Eve of Destruction: How 1965 Transformed America*. He believes that the major events of 1968 mainly exasperated shifts of mood that first became evident during 1965 (XV). He describes how the ideas held by the federal government, on one side, and mass protesters, on the other, diverged and finally created the social fragmentation and political polarization in which we still live (176).

Despite its title, *The Eve of Destruction* is actually the opposite: it is a sophisticated, carefully crafted restoration of the collective memory. Patterson, Professor of History Emeritus at Brown University and the Bancroft Prize-winning *Great Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974*, focuses on a single year of the decade, 1965, and frames it as a turning point, a fundamental pivot of the “long 1960s” (1958-1974). Scholars are familiar with the traditional narrative, which argues that the noble struggles of the early sixties were derailed by the radicalism of the late sixties. This is not Patterson’s claim. According to the author, 1965 was the

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year that “transformed America” and made the 1960s, the 1960s. It marked the break with conformity that characterized the 1950s and early 1960s and, for the first time in decades, the growth of a mass radicalization in the United States. Mass action expanded in sizes and scopes, from racial integration to peace and poverty, and led to a broad questioning of society. More important, 1965 was the year that created a distinctive, self-conscious generation: the young Americans.

Patterson sketches Lyndon Johnson, the towering figure of the book, as an agonizing commander in chief. He argues that President Johnson’s decision to involve the United States in the battleground of Vietnam, July 28, 1965, was not only wrong in itself – Johnson had no “a credible exit strategy”, he claims (174) – but also in the way it was framed and communicated to the American people. Congress had been kept in the dark about Johnson’s intentions and decisions were made after consulting a handful of advisers (172). Moreover, Johnson famously remained secretive because he was afraid that announcement of further escalation in Vietnam would damage his political standing. To be candid to the nation, Johnson pointed out, would “shatter my presidency, kill my administration, and damage our democracy” (171). Actually, the opposite happened: in part because he did not prepare the public for sacrifices that would later be required, in part because he overestimated the solidity of his popular support and the reverence of people for the presidency, he created a credibility gap that ultimately destroyed his presidency (173). Patterson falls short of saying that what made 1965 a destructive year was not the youth protest, Watts riots, or the unraveling of the civil rights coalition, but Johnson’s fatal decision to embrace the Vietnam War.

As Patterson argues, the attempt to arbitrarily divide the “early sixties” from the “late sixties” rests on dubious historical assumptions. From the mountain of literature on the 1960s, authors have previously identified 1959, 1964, 1968, and 1969 as turning points (XV). However, Patterson makes his convincing case brilliantly through a thoughtful, fast-paced, engaging book. In many respects, 1965 was a turning point: the Voting Rights Act, Head Start, and Medicare come to mind. Johnson’s address at Howard University, “To Fulfill These Rights”, for the very first time mentioned equality of results. In 1965, American troop strength in Vietnam rose from 23,000 in late 1964 to 184,000 soldiers. Inflation began to mount by 3 percent as of the end of

the following year because of the increasing economic cost of the Vietnam War. The dream of the Great Society vanished. So evocatively does Patterson take us back into the ebullient 1965 that makes the book impossible to put down.