The 1970s were a tumultuous time. In some ways, the decade was a continuation of the 1960s. Women, African Americans, Native Americans, gays and lesbians and other marginalized people continued their fight for equality, and many Americans joined the protest against the ongoing war in Vietnam. In other ways, however, the decade was a repudiation of the 1960s. A “New Right” mobilized in defense of political conservatism and traditional family roles, and the behavior of President Richard Nixon undermined many people’s faith in the good intentions of the federal government. By the end of the decade, these divisions and disappointments had set a tone for public life that many would argue is still with us today.

THE CONSERVATIVE BACKLASH

Many Americans, particularly working class and middle class whites, responded to the turbulence of the late 1960s–the urban riots, the antiwar protests, the alienating counterculture–by embracing a new kind of conservative populism. Sick of what they interpreted as spoiled hippies and whining protestors, tired of an interfering government that, in their view, coddled poor people and black people at taxpayer expense, these individuals formed what political strategists called a “silent majority.”

This silent majority swept President Richard Nixon into office in 1968. Almost immediately, Nixon began to dismantle the welfare state that had fostered such resentment. He abolished as many parts of President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty as he could, and he made a show of his resistance to mandatory school desegregation plans such as busing. On the other hand, some of Nixon’s domestic policies seem remarkably liberal today: For instance, he proposed a Family Assistance Plan that would have guaranteed every American family an income of $1,600 a year (about $10,000 in today’s money), and he urged Congress to pass a Comprehensive Health Insurance Plan that would have guaranteed affordable health care to all Americans. In general, though, Nixon’s policies favored the interests of the middle class people who felt slighted by the Great Society of the 1960s.

As the 1970s continued, some of these people helped shape a new political movement known as the “New Right.” This movement, rooted in the suburban Sun Belt, celebrated the free market and lamented the decline of “traditional” social values and roles. New Right conservatives resented and resisted what they saw as government meddling. For example, they fought against high taxes, environmental regulations, highway speed limits, national park policies in the West (the so-called “Sagebrush Rebellion”) and affirmative action and school desegregation plans. (Their anti-taxism emerged most notably in [California](http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/california) in 1978, when the Proposition 13 referendum–“a primal scream by The People against Big Government,” said The [New York](http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/new-york) Times–tried to limit the size of government by restricting the amount of property tax that the state could collect from individual homeowners.)

THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT

In some ways, though, 1960s liberalism continued to flourish. For example, the crusade to protect the environment from all sorts of assaults–toxic industrial waste in places like Love Canal, New York; dangerous meltdowns at nuclear power plants such as the one at [Three Mile Island](http://www.history.com/topics/three-mile-island) in [Pennsylvania](http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/pennsylvania); highways through city neighborhoods–really took off during the 1970s. Americans celebrated the first [Earth Day](http://www.history.com/topics/holidays/earth-day) in 1970, and Congress passed the National Environmental Policy Act that same year. The Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act followed two years later. The oil crisis of the late 1970s drew further attention to the issue of conservation. By then, environmentalism was so mainstream that the U.S. Forest Service’s Woodsy Owl interrupted Saturday morning cartoons to remind kids to “Give a Hoot; Don’t Pollute.”

FIGHTING FOR WOMEN’S RIGHTS

During the 1970s, many groups of Americans continued to fight for expanded social and political rights. In 1972, after years of campaigning by feminists, Congress approved the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Constitution, which reads: “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.” It seemed that the Amendment would pass easily. Twenty-two of the necessary 38 states ratified it right away, and the remaining states seemed close behind. However, the ERA alarmed many conservative activists, who feared that it would undermine traditional gender roles. These activists mobilized against the Amendment and managed to defeat it. In 1977, [Indiana](http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/indiana) became the 35th–and last–state to ratify the ERA.

Disappointments like these encouraged many women’s rights activists to turn away from politics. They began to build feminist communities and organizations of their own: art galleries and bookstores, consciousness-raising groups, daycare and women’s health collectives (such as the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, which published “Our Bodies, Ourselves” in 1973), rape crisis centers and abortion clinics.

THE ANTIWAR MOVEMENT

Even though very few people continued to support the war in Indochina, President Nixon feared that a retreat would make the United States look weak. As a result, instead of ending the war, Nixon and his aides devised ways to make it more palatable, such as limiting the draft and shifting the burden of combat onto South Vietnamese soldiers.

This policy seemed to work at the beginning of Nixon’s term in office. When the United States invaded Cambodia in 1970, however, hundreds of thousands of protestors clogged city streets and shut down college campuses. On May 4, National Guardsmen shot four student demonstrators at an antiwar rally at Kent State University in [Ohio](http://www.history.com/topics/us-states/ohio). Ten days later, police officers killed two black student protestors at Mississippi’s Jackson State University. Members of Congress tried to limit the president’s power by revoking the Gulf of Tonkin resolution authorizing the use of military force in Southeast Asia, but Nixon simply ignored them. Even after The New York Times published the [Pentagon](http://www.history.com/topics/pentagon) Papers, which called the government’s justifications for war into question, the bloody and inconclusive conflict continued. American troops did not leave the region until 1973.

THE WATERGATE SCANDAL

As his term in office wore on, President Nixon grew increasingly paranoid and defensive. Though he won reelection by a landslide in 1972, he resented any challenge to his authority and approved of attempts to discredit those who opposed him. In June 1972, police found five burglars from Nixon’s own Committee to Re-Elect the President in the office of the Democratic National Committee, located in the Watergate office building. Soon, they found that Nixon himself was involved in the crime: He had demanded that the Federal Bureau of Investigation stop investigating the break-in and told his aides to cover up the scandal.

In April 1974, a Congressional committee approved three articles of impeachment: obstruction of justice, misuse of federal agencies and defying the authority of Congress. Before Congress could impeach him, however, President Nixon announced that he would resign. [Gerald Ford](http://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/gerald-r-ford) took over his office, and–to the distaste of many Americans–pardoned Nixon right away.

After Watergate, many people withdrew from politics altogether. They turned instead to pop culture–easy to do in such a trend-laden, fad-happy decade. They listened to 8-track tapes of Jackson Browne, Olivia Newton-John, Donna Summer and Marvin Gaye. They made latch-hook rugs and macramé, took up racquetball and yoga, read “I’m OK, You’re OK” and “The Joy of Sex,” went to wife-swapping parties and smoked even more pot than they had in the 1960s. In general, by the end of the decade, many young people were using their hard-fought freedom to simply do as they pleased: to wear what they wanted, to grow their hair long, to have sex, to do drugs. Their liberation, in other words, was intensely personal.