10 Days That Unexpectedly Changed America

By Steven M. Gillon

A panel of leading historians undertook the challenge to come up with some less well known but historically significant events that triggered change in America- excluding any which have occurred after 1965. They deliberately sought out ‘surprising dates’ that would provoke discussion and debate. Such ‘obvious’ events as the signing of the Constitution and the attack on Pearl Harbor were overlooked in favor of days whose importance and impact have been undervalued.

What has been compiled tells the story of America ‘from the bottom up’- the stories of rural farmers and gold diggers, immigrant workers and disenfranchised Americans as well as brilliant scientists and noble statesman who have almost single handedly changed the course of American history. Although independent of each other, the stories develop themes that tie each together.

The outcome is a demonstration of some essential truths about our history; namely that key moments are often the product of random events, not purposeful actions, and that the story of America is a work in progress- not set in stone but full of internal tensions and contractions. Another theme has to do with the very nature of democratic history. Democracy in America has had a remarkably redemptive characteristic; the ability to adapt, to change, and occasionally to right past wrongs. “After a 350 year truce, the Mashantucket Pequot may have actually won the Pequot War.”

1) The first essay ‘Massacre at Mystic’ challenges you to reconcile the tragic irony of American history: a nation founded on the highest ideals was built on slaughter and destruction of epic proportion. The brutal Puritan victory over the Indians of New England set a pattern for European and Indian relations for the next two centuries. It became an ‘archetype of all the wars which followed’. There would be no assimilation of Indian culture.

Yet this story also highlights the redemptive quality of American democracy; the ability to adapt, to change, and occasionally to right past wrongs. “After a 350 year truce, the Mashantucket Pequot may have actually won the Pequot War.”

a) What were the ‘roots’ of the battle at Mystic?
b) The massacre at Mystic became a model for how whites would treat natives across the continent as the wilderness became transformed into civilization. Explain
c) Referring to this case, in what ways can democracy be both destructive and redemptive?
d) How did Europeans justify their brutality towards the Pequots and Indians in general?
e) In what ways is Manifest Destiny an expression of the prevailing attitudes towards Native Americans?

Terms:
Ethnic cleansing
“Citty on the Hill”
Wampum
James Fenimore Cooper’s The Last of the Mohicans
King Philip’s War
Praying towns
Manifest Destiny
Indian Removal Act of 1830
Trail of Tears
Foxwoods Resort Casino
2) The second essay raises an interesting question about cause and effect in history. ‘Would the founding fathers have adopted a different constitution had Daniel Shays not led his ragtag army in rebellion against Massachusetts authorities?’ It also highlights a critical tension in defining democracy: how to balance the demands and fears of democracy with the need to preserve social order?

In effect Daniel Shays exposed the fragility and fears of the democratic experiment. James Madison declared the rebellion in Massachusetts to be a ‘warning’. Ironically, the American Revolution, which was intended to limit the powers of government instead created an even stronger central authority in the Constitution. The fears of ‘mobocracy’ shaped the founding fathers’ discussion over the new constitution and the document reflects the essential conservative nature of the group.

Since first exposed by a man so shadowy that historians do not even know what he looks like, the gap between the ideals of democracy and the realities of power remain open as we debate the size and scope of our government today.

Is big government the problem or is it the solution? The Reagan Revolution and the rise of Rush Limbaugh, and the election of President Obama have breathed life into the essential over which Shays Rebellion took place. ‘The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

a) Daniel Shays has become known to historians as ‘the godfather’ of the United States Constitution. Explain how he and his followers ‘lost the rebellion but won the peace’.

b) Explain how the barter system worked in colonial America. Why did the system come crashing down after the Treaty of Paris of 1783?

c) Identify the two very different views of the legacy of the American Revolution and the true nature of democratic government held by the Shaysites on the one hand and the conservatives on the other. Which has ‘won’ out?

d) What role did George Washington play in the success of the Constitutional Convention?

e) What were the elements built into the constitution by the founding fathers to protect the fledgling democracy against radicalism?

f) Explain the gap between the ideals of the revolution expressed in the Articles of Confederation and the realities of power enshrined in the Constitution. What measure were put into the body of the Constitution to control the rise of radicalism?

g) In what ways could southerners during the Civil War claim a common heritage with Daniel Shays to support states rights and secession?

Terms:
Treaty of Paris of 1783
Articles of Confederation
Regulators
Meritocracy
The Federalist Papers (Federalist #51)
Federalists
Anti-Federalists
Virginia Resolves
demagogue
Huey Long
Joseph McCarthy
3) “Like Argos of the ancient times, I’ll leave this modern Greece; I’m bound to California mines to find the golden fleece.”

The **third story** tells the incredible tale of the largest mass movement of people in world history. “Neither the Crusades nor Alexander’s expedition to India can equal this emigration to California.” Once the **discovery of gold** in California was officially declared by President Polk in his State of the Union Address on December 5th, 1848, **“The world rushed in.”** California became a place that no other country could imitate with its diversity of race, religion, color, language, government, condition, size, strength and morals. American and world history were changed forever; in some ways beneficial, in other ways not so.

a) **What were the political, economic, social and environmental effects of the California gold rush.**
b) **How did these effects shape and define what it meant (and means) to be an American?**
c) **Evaluate the beneficial and negative effects of the consequences of the gold rush.**
d) **Explain why the discovery of gold in California and the end of the Mexican-American War can be considered one of the most remarkable coincidences in American History.**
e) **How was the forging of a new cosmopolitan culture in California a continuation of a familiar pattern of American racism and discrimination?**
f) **How did the discovery of gold transform the American Dream in contradiction to the Puritan and Jeffersonian notions of success?**

Terms:
- Sutter’s Fort
- American Dream
- Mexican-American War
- 49ers
- Overland Trail
- Oregon Trail
- Missouri Compromise
- Wilmot Proviso
- Compromise of 1850
- Popular sovereignty
- Fugitive Slave Act
- Kansas-Nebraska Act
- Uncle Tom’s Cabin
- Dred Scott Decision
4) In one of the most exciting ‘what ifs’ in the history of the world, when Corporal Barton W. Mitchell of the 27th Indiana Regiment laid his head under the shade of a tree in a meadow east of Frederick, Maryland and found a bulky envelope with three cigars, the course of the Civil War and with it the emancipation of slavery and the future of the American experiment in democracy turned completely around. How would American history have unfolded if ..........?

The fourth essay explores the effects of finding General Robert E. Lee’s Order #191 which allowed the slow-footed General McClellan to defeat the onrushing, if outnumbered Confederate army at the **Battle of Antietam**- forever dissuading the British from recognizing the Confederacy and deflating the mounting Northern peace movement.

In the Battle of Antietam on September 17th, 1862, in which four times as many Americans died on the battlefield than were killed in the **D-Day invasion of Normandy**, the shape of the American nation took form. The victory, even though it was rather tentative, gave impetus to the birth of modern America.

a) What were the elements of the modern American nation which took shape as a result of the Union victory in the Civil war and how is the legacy of Antietam alive today in both South and North?

b) What were the advantages and relative disadvantages of the Union and Confederacy in the Civil War?

c) How did each side justify the war? How did Lincoln frame the issues upon which he sent nearly 600,000 men to their death?

d) How did the nature of the civil war change as a result of the ‘victory’ at Antietam?

e) How did the Emancipation Proclamation transform the war into a struggle over the meaning of ‘freedom’? How was the issuance of the Proclamation related to the Battle of Antietam?

**Terms:**
- Copperheads
- Emancipation Proclamation
- Total war
- Sherman’s March to the Sea
- Appomattox Truce
- 13th Amendment
- 14th Amendment
- 15th Amendment
5) Chapter five is the woeful saga of working class democracy in America - its rise and death in Homestead, Pennsylvania on July 6th, 1892. One of many ever present tensions in American democracy took on yet another form; the individual (and collective) rights of workers versus the public good. While workers joined unions and looked to their government to protect their quality of life, management looked to government to protect the property rights of business so as to allow prosperity to prevail.

Sometimes it takes decades to discern the significance of a historical event. That was not the case at the Homestead Steel strike. As the brilliance of the second industrial revolution grew brighter, the already strong alliance between big business and the power of the state doomed any hope that workers could ‘own’ the factories where they toiled 12 hours a day, seven days a week. The growth of America’s industrial supremacy came at a great cost; the alternative vision of working class democracy was doomed.

a) ‘The shots fired at Homestead, like the shots fired at Lexington, were heard around the world... as were the shots fired at Mystic, Connecticut, Springfield, Massachusetts, and the Battle of Antietam, and no less than the words proclaimed by President Polk on December 5th, 1848.’ Explain

b) What were the opposing visions of the meaning of democracy articulated by American workers and industrial owners. How are these ‘visions’ of democracy similar to and different from those articulated by Daniel Shays and the Founding Fathers?

c) What were the consequences of the coming of the ‘second industrial revolution’ for American workers.

d) Describe the relationship between big business and government? What was the affect on organized labor? How did this relationship influence the future of industry in America?

Terms:
Terrence Powderly
Haymarket Square Riot
Andrew Carnegie
Henry Clay Frick
First and Second Industrial Revolutions
Frederick W. Taylor
‘iron clad’ contracts
Lockout
Coxey’s Army
Pullman Strike
Eugene Debs
6) The death of William McKinley signaled the passing of an era and the dawn of the “American century”. As America grew into an industrial giant, its rural, small town heritage was challenged by new forces - a swelling population speaking different languages and worshipping different gods, crime, congestion, cultural conflict and a growing gap between the rich and poor. Many looked to the government to ‘become an engine for social betterment; while others firmly stood on the ground of social ‘conservatism’.

The sixth essay analyzes the transition from rural and small town to industrial and urban America through the unfortunate assassination of the symbol of the past century-William McKinley- and the coming to power of the first symbol of the modern American President, Theodore Roosevelt; the first President to ride in an automobile, fly in an airplane and be submerged in a submarine.

The central questions of the day- excessive power of corporate wealth, the dangers of growing labor radicalism, environmental degradation, and the emergence of America as a world power- needed to be addressed in a different way. No less than today, Americans had a certain fear about their future. TR’s sense of Presidential power and his spirited leadership quelled those fears and shaped American society and politics for the rest of the 20th century, helping Americans make the transition from a rural republic to a world power.

a) What were the elements of Theodore Roosevelt’s leadership and politics which have made him the first truly ‘modern President “ and one of the most popular and influential American Presidents? Does he deserve his place on Mt. Rushmore?
b) In what ways did Roosevelt’s ‘accidental Presidency’ change the course of the century?
c) In what ways did TR’s presidential leadership foreshadow the New Deal and the Greta Society?
d) How did TR’s presidency answer the questions about the size and scope of government that were raised earlier by Daniel Shays?
e) Explain how both Republicans and Democrats in the modern era can embrace Theodore Roosevelt as the spokesman for their respective philosophies?

Terms:
American Century
Jacob Riis
Protective tariff
Anarchism
Conservatism
Laissez-faire liberalism
‘bully pulpit’
‘stewardship’ theory of Presidential power
Progressive Movement
JP Morgan
Northern Securities Case
‘good’ trusts / ‘bad’ trusts
‘square deal’
Conservation movement
Alfred T. Mahan
Roosevelt Corollary to Monroe Doctrine
Imperialism
Herbert Croly
Election of 1912
Curiously, the next essay about the infamous ‘monkey trial’ represents a turning point in American history not for what it resolved, but for what it revealed; a deep cultural fault line in American society. The Scopes Trial of 1925 represented the first skirmish in an ongoing culture war that continues to shape American politics in the current age.

The fault line of the 1920’s was between the values of an older rural past and a rising urban culture; between doubter and devout, between elite opinion and common belief and the public schools became the battleground between science and religion.

The ‘most amazing courtroom scene in Anglo-American history’ not only put Dayton, Ohio on the map but swept Dover, Pennsylvania into the controversy. Along the way, abortion rights, gay rights and prayer in the schools became the targets. “The past is never dead. Indeed, it is not even past.” Who is to be included and who is to excluded in the American Dream?

a) What are the sources of the deep divisions of democratic culture in the 1920’s? What are the issues today and how will they be reconciled?

b) What were the significant changes that appeared in American society in the 1920’s? What role did the automobile play in bringing about these changes in American society?

c) In what ways did the 18th Amendment represent an effort to define and defend ‘traditional’ American values and what it means to be an American?

d) What were the underlying suspicions of democracy which the Scopes Trial exposed? What did HL Mencken mean when he said that ‘Civilized life is not possible under democracy’?

e) What elements of the arguments over the Constitution which Shays Rebellion first exposed were repeated in the debate over teaching evolution? Summarize both points of view.

f) In what ways were the debates over evolution a repeat of the ongoing fault line in democracy between the struggle for the rights of the minority against majority rule?

Terms:
National culture
Prohibition/18th Amendment
Ku Klux Klan
Darwinism/ Theory of Evolution
Religious Fundamentalism
HL Mencken
ACLU
Butler Act
Cross of Gold Speech
Creation science
Intelligent design
It has been recorded that England was saved by the **short-sightedness** of Napoleon who turned away an American inventor who offered to build a fleet of steamships that could be used without sails and despite uncertain weather, transport his army across the Channel. “Had Napoleon shown more imagination...the history of the world would have taken a very different course.”

The letter written by **Albert Einstein**, the ‘Pope of Physics’ at the request of **Leo Silard**, the eccentric Hungarian born physicist, to persuade FDR to initiate the **Manhattan Project**, may be one of the most important in world history. Sometimes something as simple as a letter can change the course of history. Unlike Napoleon, FDR was persuaded to develop and use science and new technology to defeat the greatest threat to world peace at the time-Hitler and the forces of the Axis powers.

---

**a)** What was the purpose and content of the letter and how did it change the course of history both directly and indirectly. Use your imagination (one of the tools of the historian) to speculate how the present might have differed had the letter not been written.

**b)** Explain what Leo Szilard meant when he said...‘we saw the flashes...{and} that night there was little doubt that the world was headed for grief?”

**c)** What were the steps which Hitler took in leading the world into WWII? To what degree was the League of Nations at fault? To what degree was the US at fault? Could this have been avoided?

**d)** Why did Einstein leave Germany? Why did he choose to settle in the US?

**e)** Why was Einstein’s equation E=MC2 considered ‘one of the greatest achievements in the history of the world’? What were the ‘horrifying’ ramifications of the theory?

**f)** “I am become Death, destroyer of worlds.” What did Dr. Oppenheimer mean by this quote? Did all military planners and scientists agree about whether to use the atomic bomb? Summarize both sides of the debate. What was President Truman’s opinion?

**g)** Why did Einstein consider his letter to FDR as ‘one of the greatest mistakes of my life’?

**h)** What impact did the development of the nuclear weapon have on American society and culture and its relationship with the outside world?

**i)** According to President Eisenhower, what were the real costs of the cold war?

---

**Terms:**
- Yalta Conference
- Potsdam Conference
- Nuclear fission
- The Manhattan Project
- Leslie Groves
- J. Robert Oppenheimer
- MADD
- Sen. Joseph McCarthy
- ‘Big Science’
- Interstate highway system
- ‘military – industrial complex’
- Cold war
- Peace Declaration
By 1955 the glossy image of conformity and consensus of American **middle-class culture** were becoming deeply reinforced by **television and mass media**. There was a shared national culture where no one was ever sick, no one was ever poor, families were intact, men worked during the day and women stayed at home, and African–Americans were invisible.

**Elvis Presley’s** performance on the **Ed Sullivan Show** on September 9th, 1955 symbolized the emergence of a **new youth culture** that would transform American culture and politics of the modern era. No longer would they wear the same style clothing, watch the same TV shows, listen to the same music and admire the same people.

Elvis created a whole new set of cultural options for young people, stirred a mixing of the black and white races and defined an entire generation—**the Elvis generation**. He gave voice to a youth revolt that touched off a social revolution in the 1960’s and 70’s that would soon turn to political revolution.

a) What did John Lennon mean when he said, “Before Elvis there was nothing?” Why would Leonard Bernstein call Elvis Presley ‘the greatest cultural force in the 20th century’?

b) What were the elements of teenage culture as it developed in the US in the 1950’s. How did these elements clash with the emphasis on consensus and conformity? In what way was Elvis Presley the ‘Trojan Horse’ of the new youth culture?

c) Why and how did Elvis Presley emerge as such a huge star in the mid-1950’s? Did all elements of American society welcome Elvis’ rise to stardom? What position did the Catholic Church take in regards to Elvis’ popularity?

Terms:
- Middle class culture
- Emmitt Till
- Kinsey Report
- ‘race music’
- Brown v Board of Education
- “with all deliberate speed”
- Southern Manifesto of 1956
- Dick Clark’s American Bandstand
- Elvis Generation
The campaign to register blacks throughout the South in 1964, known as the Freedom Summer program, attracted Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Earl Chaney to the ‘heart of darkness’ of rural Mississippi. Their presence was like a foreign invasion to many Southern whites who treated them accordingly.

On June 21st 1964 (Father’s day) one of the organizers, Robert Moses’ prediction about what it would take to succeed tragically came true. It would take the involvement (and the death) of white students to focus the attention of the nation and the world on segregation and the plight of the black man. “They will bring the rest of the country with them”. The painful reality was that the press and public cared only when a white person was killed.

The reluctant martyrs of Freedom Summer and the odd coincidence of a Hollywood movie combined to permanently change race relations in the South, initiate a new and more radical phase of the ‘black revolution’ and ironically, strengthen the foundation of democracy in America.

a) What did William Faulkner mean when he said, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past”. How does this relate to the tragedy of Freedom Summer?

b) In what ways did the murders of these young idealist mark the dividing line between the hope and idealism of the Civil Rights Movement of the early 1960’s and the discord and dissent that followed; ‘the breeding ground for the social turmoil of the rest of the decade.’

c) What were the combination of forces which began to undermine racial segregation in the South prior to Freedom Summer?

d) What were the various methods which were used to keep African Americans disenfranchised in the South, especially in Mississippi?

e) What effect did Robert Moses’ strategy to recruit white students have on blacks involved in the Civil Rights Movement in the South?

f) What affect did the Gulf of Tonkin Crisis have on the future success of the civil rights movement and the motives of liberal white students to support it?

g) What affect did Hollywood have on the drive to bring justice to the murderers of the three civil rights workers and other unsolved cases of the period?

h) How does this dark episode in American history underscore the redemptive process of democracy?

i) Carefully explain President Lyndon Johnson’s role, attitude and motives toward the passage of the Voting Rights Act and the debate in the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City in 1964. Did all accept the terms of the so-called Atlantic City Compromise?

Terms:
- Greensboro Boys
- CORE
- SNCC
- ‘freedom riders’
- ‘poll tax’
- Robert Moses
- COFO
- 16th St Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala
- White Knights
- MFDP
- APWR
- Atlantic City compromise
- “Second reconstruction”
Edmund Pettus Bridge
Voting Rights Act of 1965
Civil Rights Act of 1966
Mississippi Burning
Jerry Mitchell
26th Amendment