



When America Turned: Reckoning with 1968

David Wyatt

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Much has been written about the seismic shifts in American culture and politics during the 1960s. Yet for all the analysis of that turbulent era, its legacy remains unclear. In this elegantly written book, David Wyatt offers a fresh perspective on the decade by focusing on the pivotal year of 1968. He takes as his point of departure the testimony delivered by returning veteran John Kerry before the Senate Armed Services Committee in 1971, as he imagined a time in the future when the word “Vietnam” would mean “the place where America finally turned.” But turning from what, to what—and for better or for worse?

Wyatt explores these questions as he retraces the decisive moments of 1968—the Tet Offensive, the McCarthy campaign, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the student revolt at Columbia, the “police riot” at the Democratic Convention in Chicago, Lyndon Johnson’s capitulation, and Richard Nixon’s ascendancy to power. Seeking to recover the emotions surrounding these events as well as analyze their significance, Wyatt draws on the insights of what Michael Herr has called “straight” and “secret” histories. The first category consists of work by professional historians, traditional journalists, public figures, and political operatives, while the second includes the writings of novelists, poets, New Journalists, and memoirists.

The aim of this parallel approach is to uncover two kinds of truth: a “scholarly truth” grounded in the documented past and an “imaginative truth” that occupies the more ambiguous realm of meaning. Only by reckoning with both, Wyatt believes, can Americans come to understand the true legacy of the 1960s.

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