

Jeremy Hales
2010 Teaching American History
Cape Cod Collaborative
Dr. Peter Gibbon

Third Paper: Book Review
The Seventies

The 1970s have always been a somewhat mysterious decade to me. I was too young to remember living in the '70s, and in school, my teachers never taught about this decade. Now, teaching a senior honors class called "Issues in U.S. History since 1950," I often don't really know what to emphasize when addressing this interesting, but seemingly lost period of American history. Bruce J. Schulman's *The Seventies* was a joy to read, and re-read this summer, as it shed an entire new light on this decade and gave me a tremendous understanding of the events and historical significance of this time.

Before reading this book, I had the typical stereotypes of the 1970s that so many Americans have. As Schulman states, many feel it is "impossible to take seriously" when thinking of the bad clothes (the leisure suit and bell bottoms), the bad hair, and the bad music. Schulman goes further by writing that the '70s is remembered by many as "just a prolonged anticlimax to the excitement of the '60s" and that "it is a wasted generation stuck between the political commitments of the '60s and the career ambitions of the '80s." Before reading this book, I also had similar thoughts. Furthermore, to me, and certainly to the way I had taught it to students, the '70s reflected, as President Carter put it, a time when the U.S. suffered a "crisis in confidence," as the country had suffered through a decade featuring Watergate, defeat in Vietnam, double digit inflation, long gas lines, and the Iran Hostage Crisis. Simply put, the '70s was nothing but bad styles and bad times for America.

Schulman's major thesis in his book is that the 1970s, in fact, was far more than a lost decade, that it "transformed American economic and cultural life as much as, if not more than, the 1920s and 1960s, and that it reshaped the political landscape more dramatically than the 1930s." Despite what so many traditionally have thought about the '70s, it is actually one of the most significant periods in U.S. history as it marked the shift from the liberal era of big government ushered in during the Great Depression by President Roosevelt and the New Deal, to the conservative America and the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s that still perhaps exists today (unless, of course the 2008 election will become the beginning of an eventual major shift back to the left...). I had always taught that when Reagan was elected in 1980, it was when the shift to a more conservative America occurred. But, in fact, Schulman effectively demonstrates that the shift happened in American politics and culture had been gradually occurring throughout the 1970s, and that Reagan was more of a result of this shift than the instigator of it. And, that even today, we are affected by this political and cultural shift

One major factor in making his case is his emphasis put on the rise in the south in terms of political power and cultural influence on the country. Before the '70s, most Americans viewed the south as a place that was "backward, brutal, entirely out of step with modern life," and that it was made up of nothing but "bible thumpers, red neck sheriffs, and reckless lynch mobs." Furthermore, before the '70s, it was generally accepted that a southerner could never be elected president. The power in the country was based in the north. However, during the 1970s, as the south experienced an economic boom, its population exploded. And, this population explosion shifted the power in the south from old deep south, to its periphery – growing cities like Charlotte, new suburbs, and retirement communities in Florida. Evidence of this shift could lie in this one simple fact. Since 1968, (until Obama) no president had ever been elected from

the north while south has provided a president from Georgia, Arkansas, and Texas. In fact, Schulman makes an interesting point regarding the powerful Bush family dynasty. Prescott Bush was a powerful Senator, a moderate Republican from the north. His grandson, George W. Bush, became the president representing Texas, as a conservative Republican who identified with southern culture.

During the '70s, southern culture also became accepted, possibly even becoming the new national style by the 1980s. Possibly as a backlash of the difficult years of the '70s, a Supreme Court that was perhaps too activist and aggressive, and certainly bolstered by a backlash in civil rights with forced bussing in the cities of the north, the "goodness" of southern culture, with its "faith in America, religion, and patriotism" didn't seem so out of touch. Country music, NASCAR, pick up trucks, and cowboy boots, all symbols of the south, have become a huge part of the American culture today. By 1984, "the brash, free-wheeling boosterism of the sunbelt south had become the national style." George W. Bush appealed to this new national style, and what was unthinkable (certainly too Lyndon Johnson), that a southern conservative politician, who identified himself with southern culture could get elected president, actually happened, as a result of the rise of the south during the 1970s.

Another huge point that Schulman makes in demonstrating the ideological shift the country experienced during the 1970s was the growing distrust and skepticism in the federal government. The years since the Great Depression had been a time of an expansive federal government with things like subsidized farms and home mortgages, strong support of unions, interstate highways, civil rights legislation, the space program, and heavy government regulation. But, during the '70s, there was a "decline in faith of government and government programs that required large scale public efforts to remake the world." Certainly Watergate and Vietnam had

something to do with that. Even more, though, was the final end of the great post WWII economic boom and power of the almighty dollar. With a decade filled with inflation, high unemployment, and a stagnant economy, Americans suddenly faced, for the first time since the Great Depression, diminished expectation. And with that, came a dramatic change in the attitude regarding taxes. What had been tolerable in the 1950s and 1960s, no longer was. Even the Democrat Jimmy Carter went along with these shifted attitudes in government as he called for an end to the wasteful spending of the federal government, and aimed to de-regulate. Perhaps some of the outrageous styles and behavior of the '70s were more a reflection of this contempt for big government and authority. I found it interesting to read that police officers in Des Moines, Iowa had long hair and beards. Maybe this anti-establishment feeling, often considered more liberal, in fact ushered in an era of conservatism and small government.

There were some smaller things I found interesting and useful for teaching. I enjoyed reading about 1973 being a tough year for the country, as opposed to the traditional "1968 is the worst year ever" approach. Despite all the political shifts, I found it interesting that when Jimmy Carter ran for president he focused on the three E's – the economy, environment, and energy. Thirty years later, I think many would still rank those as the three most pressing issues today. I certainly will focus some time on the rise of credit cards during the 1970s, especially with the recent economic situation. Also, looking at the movies of the '70s, often dark, paranoid, and antiauthoritarian, could give a good sense of the mindset of the 1970s. In conclusion, I felt that Schulman was very effective in making his case, and truly enjoyed reading this book. It has greatly changed the way I view the 1970s, and has given me a true focus on how to teach this very important decade in American history.