1965: The Dawn of Our Current Age
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This was one of SCSS President Stephen M. Krason’s “Neither Left nor Right, but Catholic” columns that appeared during 2015 in Crisismagazine.com and The Wanderer and at his blog site (skrason.wordpress.com). It discusses the seminal year 1965 (fifty years before the column appeared), when so many of our current social, cultural, and political problems and our difficulties in the Church began to take shape. It discusses the nature of the “new direction” that became evident that year, how crucial trends took shape, and how the developments of that year led to others in the short or long run.

Different writers here and there have talked about 1965, fifty years ago, as a year of transition. It was a year in America when trends came into focus, culture was altered, and life changed—politically, socially, culturally, morally, and in the Catholic Church. Perhaps historian James T. Patterson provided the most detailed elaboration on these developments and their implication for the country in his bluntly titled book from a song of the time, The Eve of Destruction: How 1965 Transformed America.

First, the national policies put in place that year as LBJ launched his Great Society made the federal welfare/entitlement state a regular feature of American life and inaugurated what another historian, Steven F. Hayward, called the “third wave of the progressive administrative state.” This was the year of Medicare and Medicaid, which made the federal government a health-care provider and re-shaper of the health-care system. What began then has culminated in Obamacare. This was when the federal education legislation was passed that made Washington an ongoing subsidizer of pre-college public schools and set up the college-level student-loan and grant programs. So began the ever-heightening federal control of education, even compromising the independence of private—including religious—higher education. The federal role in housing and urban renewal also accelerated, and for the first time included rent subsidies. It would only be a matter of years before the now almost legendary problems of high-rise federally-funded-housing projects would appear. With the creation of the National Endowment for the Arts much of the arts community became dependent on federal largesse and the new National Endowment for the Humanities motivated scholars increasingly to turn to Uncle Sam for grants. There was also the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, whose effects continue to
rock America. The Act substantially increased immigration from the Third World—with less expected of new arrivals even in terms of embracing traditional American principles—and also is credited with triggering the waves of illegal immigration and the problems that it has brought with it.

As far as American constitutional law was concerned, 1965 saw the handing down by the Supreme Court of its seminal *Griswold v. Connecticut* decision. It declared unconstitutional the legal prohibition of contraceptive use—but really also protected the distribution of contraceptives and contraceptive information, since the defendant was the head of a Planned Parenthood agency—and set out the Court’s new privacy jurisprudence, which would later be applied to pornography, abortion, and homosexual activity. As far as abortion was concerned, 1965 was the last year that all the old restrictive laws remained in place. Mississippi was the first to make a change the following year. Patterson notes that it was also 1965 that saw the AMA lift its opposition to disseminating contraceptive information. Interestingly, the AMA changed its century-old opposition to legalized abortion for any reason at all only two years later.

Next, 1965 brought a striking intensification of group conflict and, after it, the rise of identity politics in America. This was the year that the race riots that plagued the Sixties began in earnest with the Watts riots. Patterson comments how 1965 saw division within the increasingly influential civil-rights movement, with part of it becoming more militant and willing to use violence. The race riots alienated the Caucasian community. The rise of Black Nationalism and its pro-separationist objectives began to challenge the movement’s focus on integration and in the years after 1965 helped cause further racial distancing.

The Moynihan Report—“The Negro Family: The Case for National Action”—appeared in 1965. It discussed the deepening family crisis in that demographic group, which included growing illegitimacy—up to a quarter of births at that time were out of wedlock—and increasing government dependency. These troubling trends, of course, have continued and become worse (now that illegitimacy rate is 70%). The response to the Report also illustrated the convoluted, irresponsible, opportunistic, and even slanderous readiness that became standard fare in the decades ahead to claim “racism” whenever serious problems in that demographic were identified.

The family turmoil that Moynihan pointed to actually was beginning to afflict American life generally. Patterson summarizes it: “Dramatic changes in sexual behavior and family life—more demands for sexual freedom, more premarital sex, more cohabitation, more fatherless children, more divorce—began to shake American society and culture in ways that could scarcely have been imagined before 1965” (p. 246). Indeed,
those alive then will think back and recall that after 1965, the old reticence and taboos evaporated and the sexual revolution hit with full force. In fact, by 1968 sex seemed to be splashed all over: on television talk shows (with the likes of Masters and Johnson talking about it in an amoral, therapeutic fashion), in movies (moviemakers seemed almost to go out of their way to include sex scenes), and with the proliferation of X-rated theaters and pornographic books and magazines gracing the shelves of even mainstream bookstores. This laid the groundwork for the first no-fault divorce law in 1970; as such laws spread throughout the country, it became much easier to cancel one’s marriage vows than to alter a business contract.

While there had already been anti-Vietnam War and related protests—recall the Berkeley “Free Speech” Movement of 1964—the “era of protest” began in earnest in 1965, heated up considerably the following year, and became a pervasive part of American life. Certainly the civil-rights movement had ushered it in, but now it became increasingly encompassing—involving opposition to not just the war but also many of the accepted arrangements in America. It involved mostly the left or elements like college-based youth influenced by leftism. It happened curiously, or perhaps logically, in an era of rising expectations. Even though the Great Society adopted large parts of liberalism’s agenda, the left was increasingly dissatisfied. 1965 began with optimism—LBJ even thought he could win a “War on Poverty”—but went out with a growing cynicism. The optimism of the 1950s, which took a blow with the Kennedy assassination then briefly recouped, suffered a long-term reversal as the country headed into the second half of the decade. The new pessimism and sudden extolling of the antihero was seen vividly in movies, other parts of popular culture, and in social commentary.

The era of protest also heralded the youth rebellion. Seen in a more limited way for the first time in American history in the 1920s, it was a much more widespread phenomenon in the 1960s. Right after 1965, it erupted. Indeed, it was in 1965 that the counterculture emerged. At the beginning of that year, hardly anyone had heard of it. By 1966, it was splashed all over. Suddenly, the hippies, Haight-Ashbury, the new “non-conformism,” and spreading illicit drug use became engrained in the national consciousness. After 1965, the “look” of the counterculture was evident everywhere, as the standard conservative dress and appearance—especially among the young—metamorphosed into long hair, beards, and dress for women that would have been unthinkably provocative before. The mini-skirt made its appearance in America in 1966, reflecting in some sense a relaxed sexual attitude. It was a veritable fashion revolution. It also was in 1965, Patterson tells us, that we saw for the first time partial nudity in a mainstream
movie and a major pop music hit that featured sexual suggestiveness. After that, the floodgates opened.

We could see the stirrings in 1965 of three potent mass movements that would soon transform different aspects of American life: the consumer movement, environmentalism, and feminism. Late in 1965, Ralph Nader published *Unsafe at Any Speed*, about the flaws of car design, which is generally viewed as precipitating the consumer movement. While Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) did the spadework for the environmental movement and its real beginnings with Earth Day in 1970 were still five years off, 1965 marked the beginnings of implementing the Wilderness Act. Passed late in 1964, it was another Great Society initiative that provided early momentum for the environmental cause. When early feminists, led by the likes of Betty Friedan, couldn’t make headway with LBJ’s new Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (Patterson says that few American women in 1965 were interested in what they had to offer, anyway), they decided to meet to form the National Organization for Women (NOW) the following year. That inaugurated the contemporary feminist movement, which as I argued in my book, *Abortion: Politics, Morality, and the Constitution*, was the crucial factor galvanizing the effort for outright legalization of abortion. That first NOW convention, with a significant lesbian presence, and NOW’s outright endorsement of lesbian rights a few years later, also provided early momentum for another later movement: homosexualism.

The founding of the journal *The Public Interest* in 1965 signaled the beginnings of neoconservatism. That was to herald later divisions in the conservative movement and be a major influence on future Republican presidential administrations (especially in foreign policy).

Vatican II concluded in 1965. As far as the Church in the U.S was concerned, right after Vatican II, the much-discussed misinterpretation of what the Council meant and the misapplication and even twisting of its decrees was to begin. It also meant that the secularization of a significant part of the American Catholic community—getting us to the “I’m Catholic, but I can believe what I want” mentality—began.

As Allan Carlson writes, 1965 was also the last year of rising fertility among American Catholics. In the years immediately following, Catholic fertility plummeted, especially among the better educated, and was no longer even related to frequency of Mass attendance. The anti-natalist and contraceptive ethic became implanted among Catholics and, of course, widespread dissent followed from *Humanae Vitae* three years later.

1965 was the decisive end of the “old order.” It was also the beginning of the current age that now rushes at us with a vengeance and threatens to overwhelm us.