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Review of Patterson, *The Eve of Destruction: How 1965 Transformed America*

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James T. Patterson. *The Eve of Destruction: How 1965 Transformed America.* New York: Basic Books, 2012. xvi + 310 pp. \$28.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-01358-6.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

James T. Patterson moves to focus popular attention away from the chaos of the latter 1960s to the year when that unrest took root. For Patterson, the events of 1965 began to crack through the façade of unity and optimism that carried over from the previous decade, and agrees with others who have labeled 1965 as the opening of the 1960s. He describes the year as one of “exceptionally rapid and widespread change,” but qualifies his argument by adding, “though by no means was all of it for the worse” (p. xiii). Patterson provides an engaging snapshot view of the key events in 1965 in a style similar to Gerard DeGroot’s *The Sixties Unplugged* (2008). By moving across the months, the reader gains a sense of how the mood in the nation shifts from the optimism of 1964 to a more serious tone as the collective national hope for a Great Society dissipated by fall 1965.

Patterson builds his argument around several narratives. Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society programs to tackle civil rights and the economy at home, the escalation of the Vietnam War, and the outbursts of racial strife in Selma and Watts in an age of burgeoning technological advances form the core of this utterly readable synthesis. Throughout the work, Patterson pauses to provide cultural context through an examination of popular film and music. Notably, he draws the title of the book from the Barry McGuire hit “Eve of De-

struction” that made the mix of rock and protest music a chart success in September 1965. The popularity of the song marked a shift toward a new, less optimistic, era of the 1960s.

Several dates play key roles in Patterson’s argument. He identifies the March 7, “Bloody Sunday,” attacks against civil rights marchers in Selma and the March 8 landing of American combat troops in Vietnam as some of the first critical events of the decade. He writes, “More than any other happenings, they pulled the United States into the contentious era that Americans now think of as the Sixties” (p. 66). Within 1965, June 28 marks the pivotal moment for Patterson’s narrative of transformation. Johnson’s decision to escalate the Vietnam War through the rapid increase of troops set the decade on a track where negative reactions to the conflict overshadowed efforts, and drained budgets, to improve civil rights or domestic programs at home. Johnson’s foreign policy decisions regarding Vietnam skewed national attention away from his domestic policies. Patterson argues, “The battles over Title VI and school segregation, like those over the OEO and EEOC, had their roots in LBJ’s conviction in 1964 and early 1965 that he had to move quickly if he expected to push his vast vision of a Great Society through Congress” (p. 218). Rushing the programs through, Patterson maintains, led to more political problems

and frustrations that only intensified as Johnson's grasp on popular support slipped later in the year.

By way of conclusion, Patterson examines the legacy of the 1960s and its role in shaping the politics of the 1970s and 1980s. Patterson concedes that politics moved in a more conservative direction, but rejects the idea that the "Age of Conservatism arrived as of the election of 1966" (p. 243). Rather, he argues that 1965 transformed American domestic politics in a more liberal direction as Congress continued to pass legislation supporting civil and gender rights for much of the next decade. This rejection of a full endorsement of a conservative shift in politics puts Patterson's work in line with historians like David Courtwright.[1] Giving credit to those who focus on 1968 and 1969 as the central moments of the decade, Patterson agrees that the issues came to a head at that point. Those moments existed, however, as a result of the "volatile mixture of restlessness, rights-consciousness, and discord that had first become clearly evident in 1965" (p. 247). With this, Patterson agrees with those who place a stake in 1965 as the year that really started the 1960s of public memory.

Patterson's book would work particularly well in an undergraduate survey of the twentieth century or postwar America. He places 1965 into the context of the broader decade, but his dive into the events of the year also illustrates the benefits of narrowing in on a limited time and approaching it from multiple lenses. Scholars of the events covered in the book will likely want more detail than any synthesis can offer, but showing how the events weave together into the broader social, cultural, and political shifts of the year offers readers a useful and entertaining insight into 1965.

Note

[1]. David Courtwright, *No Right Turn: Conservative Politics in a Liberal America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

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