Social activism in the 1960s had its ideological roots in a sense that all things were finally possible in affluent, postwar America; and that hypocrisy, of either a personal or a social sort would no longer be tolerated. This earthly “perfectionism” like that which had motivated abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and John Brown before the Civil War and socialist Eugene Debs and reformer Jane Addams in the early 20th Century, gave an enormous spirit and energy to the movements around which so much of the politics of the 1960s revolved. As the 1960s opened, America seemed to many observers to be on the verge of a golden age. The presidency of the young John F. Kennedy, elected in 1960, seemed to give Americans a feeling of success, matching imperial splendor abroad with prosperity, harmony and progress at home. By the end of the 1960s however, these assumptions were no longer self-evident. Using mass protests to mobilize public opinion, the civil rights movement shook the country and sparked a broad wave of popular activism that called for the full realization of America’s democratic promise.

In the 1950s and 60s, the sharpest exception to America’s celebration of an affluent, classless social order was the racism prevalent in both North and South. Shaped by the legacy of slavery and the failure of Reconstruction, race relations constituted a glaring failure. As an economic structure, a public policy, and a private belief system, racism was on the defensive by the end of WW II, but this did not mean that segregation had been defeated.

African-Americans took the lead in challenging racial inequality. The mass migration of African-Americans out of agriculture and into urban industrial society helped move the problem of racism to center stage. The rapid postwar urbanization created the conditions that would support an effective protest movement: a growing black electorate and an integrated union movement in the North; and an increasingly assertive black church in the South. The results, by the middle 60s were impressive: the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the most far-reaching civil rights measure ever enacted by the Congress. It outlawed discrimination in hotels, restaurants, and other public accommodations. It required that literacy tests for voting be administered in writing, and defined as literate anybody who had finished the sixth grade. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was intended to ensure all the right to vote and led to the immediate registration of 250,000 new black voters. But in the midst of its success the Civil Rights movement began to fragment. As it began to focus on the plight of urban blacks it became clear to many leaders that the non-violent tactics which had worked in the rural South would work in the northern cities. “It may be,” wrote an editor of *Esquire*, ”that looting, rioting and burning are really nothing more than radical forms of urban renewal, a response not only to the frustrations of the ghetto but the collapse of all ordinary modes of change, as if a body despairing of the indifference of doctors sought to rip a cancer out of itself.” Ominously, in 1966, forty-two (42) American cities suffered race riots during the summer. Detroit provided the most graphic example of urban violence as tanks rolled through the streets and soldiers used machine guns to deal with snipers in the tenements.
By 1966, *Black Power*, had become the new rallying cry. Radical members of civil rights groups became estranged from Martin Luther King’s theories of militant nonviolence. The most articulate spokesman for black power was Malcolm X, but H. Rap Brown probably expressed the frustrations and anger which motivated black power most clearly when he said, “get you some guns....and kill the honkies.” Black power was a slogan more than a philosophy. As one observer noted, “black power rhetoric and ideology actually expresses a lack of power....powerless to make any fundamental changes in the life of the masses, many blacks have retreated into an unreal world where they see an outnumbered and poverty-stricken minority organizing itself independently of whites and creating sufficient power to force white Americans to grant its demands.”