

# Those Fabulous Sixties

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Murray Polner

*Past in Present Tense*



Demonstrators at Grant Park during the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

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*The decade from the early 1960s to the early 1970s was a time of citizen activism on a tremendous scale. The two major foci were the Vietnam War (and related imperialistic endeavors) and social justice across race, sex, and sexual orientation lines. People went back to sleep thinking that the struggles had been won. Unfortunately the forces of power and exploitation seem to require constant vigilance from an aware, informed, and alert citizenry. -rw*

[dropcap]S[/dropcap]o what, after all, was so crucial about the sixties and especially the election of 1968?

Take your pick: The lacerating and legendary decade began with JFK's murder or in the Deep South and the nonviolent battle for racial justice. In its wake arose unprecedented challenges to the status quo by SDS, the New Left and the Black Power, Gay, Feminist and Chicano movements, the Berrigan and Catholic

Left's draft board raids, rebellions in the military here and in Vietnam and mass antiwar demonstrations.



1968 Memphis Sanitation Workers strike.

Michael A. Cohen's outstanding "American Maelstrom: The 1968 Election and the Politics of Division" makes sense of so explosive, emotional and intense decade, which has since been cherry-picked by left and right, revered by one and loathed by the other. Cohen's telling, in spirited and vigorous prose, while more narrative than analysis, is a carefully-researched account of what happened and how it affected future developments.

Equally enlightening was Bernard von Bothmer's compelling 2010 book, "Framing the Sixties: The Use and Abuse of a Decade from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush," in which he explained why prowar conservatives believed as they did. "The sixties for the conservatives," he wrote, "is a time of 'uppity blacks,' of 'vociferous women,' feminists, of angry riots and lack of patriotism." Theirs was an imaginary era of the post-WWII fifties (conveniently overlooking the Korean War where 38,000 Americans were killed in a dubious war, not to mention several million dead Koreans) when authority and elders were supposedly respected and people of all classes and races knew their place. Anthony Dolan, Reagan's speechwriter for eight

years, told von Bothmer that the right, not the left, was the beneficiary of the turmoil. "The sixties gave us Ronald Reagan [and] the primary political phenomenon of the last forty years has been the rise of the conservatives and their triumph."

Cohen doesn't entirely disagree with Dolan's interpretation, but he retells the story of Chicago, where in 1968 a distant war was fought in its streets and parks while the Democratic Party was gathering to choose its presidential candidate. The late and great journalist Haynes Johnson, who saw it all, wrote that Mayor Richard Daley – superbly etched in Mike Royko's "Boss" – had surrounded the International Amphitheatre where the Democratic convention was to be held, with "armed and helmeted police mingled with dark-suited agents of the Secret Service," over which hung a large –sardonic" – sign, HELLO DEMOCRATS! WELCOME TO CHICAGO." Johnson described Chicago police lobbing tear gas at the crowds and flailing Billy clubs and yelling "Kill, Kill, Kill." The National Guard was also present, fully-armed, with orders "to shoot to kill, if necessary" at essentially peaceful protestors and a lesser number of not-so-peaceful provocateurs, a portent of the horrendous and inexcusable Kent State murders in May 1970 of four students and the wounding of nine others by Ohio National Guardsmen, some of whom had joined to avoid the draft.

Inside the Convention Hall Cohen's coverage shines, especially his account of the Daley-Ribicoff confrontation, when Connecticut Senator Abraham Ribicoff went to the podium and said that if George McGovern were nominated "we wouldn't have Gestapo tactics on the streets of Chicago."

Cohen comments: "The audacity of Ribicoff's words momentarily stunned the delegates into silence. Then the crowd exploded. Antiwar delegates rose to their feet in adulation. Mayor Daley stood too." yelling at Ribicoff," "Fuck you, you Jew son of a bitch, you lousy motherfucker, go home."

But there's more. "The conflict between urbane, liberal Ribicoff and the profane, working class Daley exposed another widening gulf among Democrats" between its educated, urban-suburban loyalists and their onetime allies among the working and lower middle class, "precisely the divide clearly expressed by the appeal" of George Wallace's independent run for the presidency and perhaps even Donald Trump in 2016.

Observing closely, Theodore White summed up the chaos in Chicago in one of his "Making of the President" volumes, concluding, "1968 crushed the idealism of the Democratic Party." If not entirely correct, it was nearly so, and went a long way to understanding how and why the party abandoned its New Deal and Great Society heritage and became accommodating Republican-lites. That and the persistent assaults about the sixties by every Republican president since Reagan "put the Democrats on the defensive on all matters regarding the era," as von Bothmer put it.

Cohen then turns to the nine men running for their party nomination. Richard Nixon, the winner, had earned the respect of the faithful in the fifties when he fought the once liberal New York Post's accusation of personal corruption by emphasizing instead Pat's cloth coat and his daughters' cute little dog. His rivals were: George Romney, Mitt's politically moderate father and successful American Motors automobile executive who self-immolated when he confessed to having been "brainwashed" about Vietnam by U.S. officials; Nelson Rockefeller, the last major Republican to urge federal intervention and money to help the most vulnerable; and Ronald Reagan who would one day electrify Republicans with his optimistic and scripted "Morning in America" shtick along with other vacuous lines like, "Our problems are many, but our capacity for solving them is limitless."

The Democrats, intimidated and reeling since the "Who lost China?" and McCarthyite libels of the fifties, featured a motley group of contenders, first of all the Party leaders'

choice, Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, the old liberal warhorse said to have grave doubts about the war but which he kept to himself. Bullied by the bully LBJ, he obediently refrained from any criticism of the war.

Eugene McCarthy, a true outlier, poet, faithful Catholic, inspirer of "Clean for Gene" kids – a la Bernie's Millennials– whose campaign, notes Cohen, "ended with a desultory whimper," after which he twice ran quixotic races for the presidency on miniscule third party lines and ended up supporting Reagan on 1980.

Robert Kennedy, a late entry whose passionate media followers such as the Village Voice's Jack Newfield painted him as the defender of America's black and white working class. Cohen suggests RFK was really a centrist-liberal who ran because he despised LBJ (and vice versa) and would in any event never have been able to beat Humphrey. Maybe so, maybe not. But when his body was sent north for burial tens of thousands respectfully lined the railroad tracks, an honor never accorded any of the others in either party.

George McGovern, a WWII bomber pilot who flew 36 missions, an unapologetic antiwar liberal, a decent and honest man, who angrily told his Senate colleagues in 1970 that "Every senator in this chamber is partly responsible for sending 50,000 young Americans to an early grave. This chamber reeks of blood," sentiments for which he was severely punished by patriotic voters when he ran against Nixon in 1972.

Hovering over all the campaigners was LBJ's savage war and the despised and feared draft. Cohen, born in 1971 and von Bothmer, born in 1967, overlooked the draft and the anxiety and stress it caused. As a former college teacher (and onetime draftee) I think I understood what my male students were undergoing, "I won't go," I remember hearing a student at a draft counseling session telling his WWII veteran father, "because I believe in Jesus' message of peace." At which his

father slapped him. In America," he whispered loud enough for me to hear, "We trust our leaders and love our country."

And then there was third party candidate George Wallace, fervent supporter of the war, menacing and fascinating, the proponent of "Segregation now. Segregation tomorrow, Segregation forever" and his exaltation of the so-called "common man." He charmed his reverent pre- Tea Partyish audiences with down home humor, live country music, and vicious attacks on anyone he viewed as critical power brokers. He wound up shocking pundits and politicians when he received ten million votes, many of them former loyal Democrats. It was Wallace who put a match to the widespread resentment many whites held then and now against blacks. But as Cohen astutely observes, it was his view of Washington's limited role which became the conservative's gold standard in the decades ahead.

"The idea that the federal government does direct harm to the American people, that its expansion constitutes a usurpation of freedom, that it imposes its own values and moral conceits on ordinary people is a pro forma critique out of the mouths of Republican politicians (and occasionally Democrats)... No politician did more to change the narrative and language of American politics than Wallace."

In the end, the election of 1968 widened the gap between Republicans and the badly torn Democrats. By the time Bill Clinton arrived, his "triangulation" policies sounded much like the Republicans with his call for severe welfare curbs on the poorest of the poor, eliminating Glass -Steagall, and support for NAFTA. And then there was his pro-death penalty view. He once left his New Hampshire presidential primary campaign to fly home to Arkansas to sign the death warrant for a prisoner with an IQ somewhere in the 60s.

Still, things may – or may not– be changing. Cohen is not alone in presuming that the growing number of African Americans, Latinos and Asian-Americans will change our

political direction. "The Democrats now hold the political trump card," he concludes, or hopes. "No longer could the Republican Party run successfully on the template of anxiety, resentment, and white backlash fashioned out of the election of 1968." Perhaps, but von Bothmer reminds us that presidential elections since the sixties showed that its memories and impact will remain with us "so long as politicians who came of age in the 1960s seek high office—and perhaps longer— the tensions of the era will retain their power."

About Hillary, Bernie and Donald, who knows? The scars of 1968 are still with us.

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### Murray Polner



Wrote "[No Victory Parades: The Return of the Vietnam Veteran](#)"; "[When Can I Come Home](#)," about draft evaders during the Vietnam era; co-authored with Jim O'Grady, "[Disarmed and Dangerous](#)," a dual biography of Dan and Phil Berrigan; and most recently, with Thomas Woods, Jr., "[We Who Dared to Say No to War](#)."

He is the senior book review editor for the History News Network.

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