

# The '60s, 40 Years Later

No Chicago in Denver

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2008

Forty years ago, like today, the country found itself in an unpopular war of imperial domination to vanquish, not “Islamofascism,” but Communism. And, like then, the political system was thoroughly corrupt and in the hands of a cabal of stooges with nightmarish plans.

Like so many others, when an election year rolls around and party politics rules the “news” with its loathsome trivia and journalistic manipulations, I long for refuge in an idyllic retreat deep in a forest far away from all media. But that isn’t an option for me, nor, I suspect for most people.

So, what to do? How do we express our disgust in a creative and non-destructive way? Let me recap a bit of personal history to provide a context for thoughts I have regarding this year and how to approach it.

## Active in anarcho-surrealist group

In the Sixties, I was active in the anarcho-surrealist group that founded Solidarity Bookshop in Chicago. Solidarity was established in a working-class neighborhood on the North side near Lincoln Park. We published a neo-Wobbly journal, *Rebel Worker*, reprinted obscure insurrectionary pamphlets, issued broadsides condemning the outrage du jour, and celebrated the suppressed history of the free spirit and did what today, I guess, would be called “performance art.”

The *Rebel Worker* was distributed nationally and we achieved a bit of celebrity among the politically aware cultural fringe, so it didn’t come as much of a surprise when, in late summer 1967, we were visited by anti-war activist, Jerry Rubin, who introduced us to the idea of staging a “Youth International Party” festival in Chicago during the same week as the Democrat convention the following year. The Yippies were created as a means of politicizing the hippie phenomenon, then all the rage in the press after the 1967 “Summer of Love” in San Francisco.

Not surprisingly, we felt that the whole idea was too wacky and beside the point. We had no interest in “politicizing” the hippies; our project was to “politicize” the youth of Chicago, who were hardly hippies. The hippies at that time were a suburban subculture. By the way, many of us associated with Solidarity had “sterling” working-class pedigrees. My father, for instance, in his youth was a Wobbly and then, after establishing a family, a member of the Steelworkers union. Given the industrial economy of Chicago, it was a strong union town with a well renowned history of labor struggles, which we proudly referred to in our public encounters.

The bi-coastal Yippie “warlords/clowns/promoters” weren’t interested in our point of view, of course; they wanted recruits for their demonstration. As the idea of this crazy event took form and developed a media momentum in what was called the underground or alternative press of that era, I traveled to New York to interview Abbie Hoffman for the Chicago SEED, a local free newspaper, in the Fall of 1967. My intent was to ridicule the whole thing.

But when I arrived for the interview, I found Abbie beside himself with glee that he, Rubin and Paul Krassner (editor of the satirical journal *The Realist*) had recruited Allen Ginsburg, Timothy Leary and a number of rock groups, including Detroit's legendary MC5. It was apparent that they were going to pull off their Chicago escapade no matter if they had local support or not.

Furthermore, the near victory of anti-war Senator Eugene McCarthy over Lyndon Johnson in New Hampshire's presidential primary created turmoil in the Democrat Party. This, added to the political assassinations of King and Kennedy, urban insurrections, and generalized international bedlam, the Yippies knew they were guaranteed a huge stage for their political theater.

I'll skip the rest of the history to fast forward to that summer and to a personal account of that week in August. As I said, the rush of events throughout 1968 guaranteed not only a huge turnout of hippies and anti-war activists, but also politicians of all left sectarian stripes, street fighters with minimal politics beyond trashing pigs, and even some local, politically savvy street gangs like the Puerto Rican "Young Lords" made an appearance.

The Daley Machine, to script, performed magnificently, as only an entrenched, corrupt city political machine can do. Too stupid to understand how to react to a gaggle of absurdists proposing to descend on Chicago to nominate Pegasus the Pig for president, the city both threatened them with arrest and tried at the same time to sequester them four miles north of the convention center in Lincoln Park. While many of the Yippies came for the fun, games, and drugs, others, not so inexperienced, expected violence and weren't disappointed.

I have a very clear recollection of the evening after the big demonstration downtown, the one where the whole world was "watching," when folks returning to their camps in Lincoln Park, two miles north of the Loop (downtown Chicago), began pelting a patrol car with rocks, bricks and bottles. The lone cop, frightened and fearful of a trap and not able to see in the darkness the source of the bombardment, jumped out of his car and, using the door as a shield, knelt down behind it and began shooting wildly to chase away his assailants.

Bits of brick from a building behind me exploded from the impact of a bullet and shattered to the ground and several of us ran out of the area faster than we thought our legs could propel us. That evening, those of us who lived on the North Side of Chicago, smelled the tear gas emanating from the park and could not venture out for fear of encountering cops seeking revenge. This wasn't the Yippie party in the park my friends and I expected.

The confrontations that occurred and have been memorialized in film footage, like Haskell Wexler's *Medium Cool*, and in song, only offer a partial view of what happened that week. For instance, the local white street kids, many organized by Rising Up Angry, who often would be likely to beat up longhairs, hesitantly ventured into the hippie encampments. Of course, they were instantly won over by free drugs galore. And, when it came to street fighting, some of them got into it and I suspect that it was the gang kids, along with the street-fighting politicians, who were pelting the cop car, not the out-of-town hippies who merely wanted to bliss out after the evening's police riot on Michigan Avenue.

The mass preventive arrests some politically active Chicagoans expected thankfully never occurred. And others, not so paranoid, who volunteered as movement security in the park, donning motorcycle helmets and carrying baseball bats, by their presence may have been a real and necessary deterrent, keeping police violence to a minimum in the encampment and protecting a semi-liberated drug zone for several days.

Another, more pleasant recollection, was traveling around Chicago and, because of my beard and long hair, having peace signs flashed to me by blacks and Latinos, both young and old. An odd and wonderful sense of solidarity existed for a time in Chicago among white freaks and the city's so-called "minorities." The appearance of standing up to "the Man" resonated throughout the communities that faced the oppression of the Chicago pigs daily.

The theater of that week extended months afterwards during the trial of the Chicago 8, Rubin, Hoffman, Tom Hayden, Bobby Seale, and others, on riot charges. For a while, another form of solidarity fused with the traditional peace movement, the Black Panthers, and Yippies all thrown into a courtroom to face the consequences of disrupting a convention that nominated a loser: Hubert Humphrey.

But what to make of this event? Was the whole Yippie spectacle nonsensical, if not completely unethical? The only answer is, yes. Bringing a bunch of naive kids to Chicago for a "Festival of Life" that the organizers knew would turn violent is hardly a practice to duplicate.

The considerable cultural residue served the purpose of myth-building the '60s as a "Decade of Youth Rebellion" (as opposed to a more appropriate appellation, for instance, a Decade of Imperial Adventures), but beyond that how should we view the events of that August?

Obviously, it galvanized an oppositional culture in a way that Woodstock or the Summer of Love could not. And, while I have emphasized the Yippies, many people came to Chicago expecting to protest the convention peacefully, and despite the difficulties of securing the permits, there was a huge nonviolent march to the convention. That demonstration, headed by among others, the popular black comedian and civil rights activist, Dick Gregory, consisted of an older crowd and was racially diverse, including many locals who attended to protest Mayor Richard Daley's police state tactics as much as the Democrats and the Vietnam war.

I have not read any memoirs of the Sixties and probably never will, so I can't say for certain whether it has been documented that the experience of the convention events, either directly or vicariously through the extensive media coverage, contributed to the demise of the national student movement. A movement that fragmented and repudiated a vocal, if ultimately ineffectual, anarchist option at Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) conferences in the late '60s and took a turn towards sectarianism and spectacular, pseudo-redemptive violence. A dead end, literally, for some, and figuratively for a viable resistance.

After all these years, activists, not to mention the general populace, have few illusions that party politics amount to anything but an enclosure: that working in the political arena, given the lock-hold of the corporations, will lead to any progressive benefit. This despite the advanced star-making methodology (the Spectacle continues to gain sophistication) that has propelled Barack Obama into party leadership and has convinced many people that he represents some significant hope. With political expression circumscribed, should we be surprised that people grasp for hope that change can be affected only through the electoral process?

Using the stage afforded by a Democrat convention to petition the Party for a "progressive platform" that offers the citizenry, at best, something like neo-liberalism-lite is, of course, a waste of time. Electoral politics is pigshit to paraphrase the surrealists' derision of popular French novels of their day. I am dubious, to say the least, that we can use any current party formation to build from local, practical, grassroots efforts and create a rhizomic phenomenon on a national level. However, to use the media circus to highlight a new kind of politics, not as a program, but as a paradigm, would be a worthwhile aim.

The biggest difference between 1968 and today is the development across the nation of a rich 'diversity of activists, in all arenas, consciously developing their autonomy and seeking new ways of securing their successes as they cultivate community expression. This is the radical, oppositional movement that didn't exist forty years ago; contrary to how the 60's has been marketed, while that period experienced an explosive growth of social animation in many areas, the depth, the rootedness of the institutions created back then doesn't compare to those developing today.

But the question remains. How to use the media to draw attention to what is essentially, a grassroots movement for radical democracy? Obviously the media has its own superficial agenda so, for example, the festival aspect of the 1968 Yippie convention played to the media's desire to capture ten seconds of "weirdness" and was essentially meaningless. I remember both Leary and Ginsburg as they made their appearance at Lincoln Park with the media documenting their presence and then disappearing with their cameras as soon as the celebrities departed: a pseudo event if ever there was one.

I would contrast that episode with one I witnessed in Birmingham, England at the 1998 G-7 meeting. Activists from a wide array of groups from across England created space to demonstrate an alternative society to the one represented by the leaders of the capitalist powers. While the heads-of-state conferred to strategize their manipulations of their respective populations, activists found a municipally owned, deserted, junk-strewn lot near a public housing project and transformed it into a little park and demonstration center.

They brought the neighbors into their planning process and gained their assistance in cleaning up the lot and hauling good soil to plant a few trees and bushes and a vegetable garden. They constructed a simple playground for kids, who gleefully helped out from the beginning; built some benches and tables for picnics and erected a few tents for demonstration projects, meetings and music. Their idea was to erect a site not only for the media to attend while covering the G-7, but also to leave it improved as a gift to the community.

Of course, there was a major demonstration of thousands and there was a Peoples Assembly in a hotel in the Birmingham city center, complete with workshops and presentations, but that assemblage in the vacant lot was so clever and attractive (and “photogenic”) that they got tons of media representatives showing up every day for almost a week.

The prospect of another confrontational Chicago ’68 in Denver, which the media may fantasize about, needs to be firmly dispelled with an event that shows how resourceful and positive, how dignified and powerful people can be working to build a better society.

The Democrats coming to Denver may induce near-hysteria on the convention floor with their hyped-up media creation, and they may even delude themselves and others into thinking they are “working for change.” Those in communities across the country working to create real change know that it comes not by wishing for it, or asking for it, or hoping for it. Only small change comes that way. Real change, like freedom, or human rights doesn’t come to those who plead for it. It doesn’t come at all, really. It must be taken.

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