

USA: UNENDING 1968

Todd Gitlin

The nature of Lt. John Kerry’s performance on a naval vessel in Vietnamese waters in 1968-69 became a central issue in America’s 2004 election. The question of whether the one-time Air National Guard pilot George W. Bush had discharged his military duty after graduating from Yale University in 1968 played a far smaller part.

In October 2008, needling Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, who had supported a tiny federal appropriation for a museum to commemorate the Woodstock concert of 1969, Senator John McCain brought a Republican audience to its feet when he declared that he had not attended that concert because he had been “tied up at the time”—an obvious allusion to his long imprisonment in North Vietnam after his navy plane was shot down. Barack Obama has periodically told adoring crowds that the culture wars of the 1960s ought to be ended.

Politicians disagree over the consequences of 1968

As in 1992, when Bill Clinton’s wartime draft evasion and his claim not to have inhaled marijuana became campaign issues, and as in 1980, when Ronald Reagan gave a speech defending “states’ rights” in the county where three civil rights workers had been murdered in 1964, American politicians are still fighting over the 1960s, over what happened, and over its meaning. Were the changes, on balance, good or bad?

This question draws the fundamental divide in American politics today. This history, or wound, is still open because the conflicts that gushed forth during 1968 and the surrounding years went to the heart of American identity. Two visions of America collided—sometimes in the same breast. Opposing ideas about male-female relations, about race and sexuality, about authority altogether, about America’s relation to the rest of the world clashed violently. The forces unleashed four decades ago have not ceased to collide.

Protests helped Nixon to power

Again and again in the 1960s, anti-authority charged at authority, and the authorities met the defining test of their rule in a fight

against rebels with or without causes. In the imagery of the time, history was either ending or beginning, or both at once. Hope was planted; hope was uprooted. Heroes stepped forward; so did assassins. Recall that in the immediate sense, 1968 was won by the Right—in a year of the savage murders of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy; after black riots in more than 100 cities; after the August police riots in Chicago that were more widely blamed on the demonstrators at the Democratic Convention than on



Sit-in at Columbia University on April 26, 1968, protesting the Vietnam War and racial discrimination.

the police and the political authorities who were actually responsible. With one convulsion after another, all amplified by the mass media, it was Richard Nixon who was elected president on the strength of a political backlash, launching a political counterrevolution that lasted almost uninterrupted, and with savage results, for four subsequent decades, and has still not evaporated.

History as a collective nightmare

One of the sublime and strange features of the insurgent '68 was the way it coated differences of intention with an apparently unifying mist—drugs, sexual liberation, “the revolution.” But common to the various manifestations of the insurgent '68 was an insistence that, despite all appearances of fixed tradition and immovable authority, life was open and democracy was an uncompleted project.

History was a prologue to freedom, if not an illusion that the moment of freedom had already arrived. Perhaps—thought the utopians—history was a collective nightmare from which we were already beginning to awake! But looming in the background was a political majority that joined the newly Republican South with disaffected white working-class males—Nixon’s “silent majority”—insisting that history was very far from open and striving to slam the door.

The “68ers” believed they were the future, but they were not even the present. America’s best-selling poet of 1968 was neither Bob Dylan nor the anti-war radical Robert Lowell but a sentimental kitschmeister named Rod McKuen. The most popular television shows were traditional westerns and rural comedies. The musical *Funny Girl* sold more movie tickets in the United States than the countercultural favorite *2001: A Space Odyssey*. As ’68’s own bards and guerrillas manqués often failed—or refused—to know, not everyone under thirty was swinging together into the age of psychedelic mystery tours, surrealistically stuttering consciousness, and fervent gauchisme.

Discontent about the excesses of the Bush era

Among those who were galvanized by ’68 were the likes of George W. Bush, Newt Gingrich, and John McCain, who resolved never to let such foolishness happen again and organized to prevent it. These were the rollbackers: the corporate and fundamentalist artists of Nixon’s Southern Strategy, soon joined by the neo-conservatives, all of them triumphant (after an embarrassing pause for impeachment) in the Reagan restoration and then riding high in George W. Bush’s administration.

Still, popular currents revolted by the reactionary excesses of the Bush years and eager to resume the progressive project mobilized against them, not without success. It is, as they say, no accident that the two principal rivals for the Democratic nomination in the election campaign of 2008 were an African American and a woman, neither of whose candidacies would have been imaginable without the movements of the 1960s. The efforts, first by Hillary Clinton’s supporters, then by the Republicans, to tar Barack Obama with excesses rooted in the ’60’s—the black nationalism of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, the terrorism of Bill Ayers, the militant community organizing of Saul Alinsky—failed to defeat him.

Obama has placed himself in the line of progressives; at the same time, he has frequently spoken of the need to transcend the polarizations of decades past. As his first few months in the White House have shown, it is easier to speak of such transcendence than to accomplish it as long as the Republican Party has been captured by its right (and now virtually only) wing. The rhetoric of bipartisanship may be politic, but it cannot be realized. Thus, regardless of his initial intentions, Obama proves to be a child of the ’60s. With

his win, the Democrats can, at long last, reap some long-deferred harvests from the decade's movements. It is not clear who will get the last word in history, but what is clear is that the fight is still on to inherit that improbable and unrepeatable decade.

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