north of New York City in the late summer of 1969 that attracted half a million people who got stoned and frolicked in the mud.

Such efforts to hitch the culture of rock and roll to political rebellion invariably flopped. The crowd at Woodstock booed the flamboyant Hoffman, when, high on LSD, he began denouncing the arrest of Sinclair for possession of marijuana. Peter Townshend, leader of the Who, promptly whacked Hoffman off the stage with his guitar. Rock musicians, even more than most artists, mistrusted political figures who wanted them to articulate a certain message they themselves had not conceived. "Won't get fooled again," chanted the Who in one of their more memorable songs. For reasons of ego or creativity, few rock and rollers joined any contingent of the radical movement. "My music isn't supposed to make you riot," explained Janis Joplin, "it's supposed to make you fuck."

Joplin's own life demonstrated rock's power to reinvent the individual—and its limits as liberation. Growing up with bad skin and a weight problem in the working-class town of Port Arthur, Texas, Joplin had few friends and little prospect of a brighter future. She spent a good deal of time in her room—listening to and writing music, making her own clothes, and taking drugs. A few years after high school, Joplin moved to San Francisco when the Haight-Ashbury scene was in full flower. There, backed by the band Big Brother and the Holding Company, she began to sing the blues in a most arresting fashion.
To hear Joplin’s renditions of such blues standards as “Ball and Chain” and “Piece of My Heart” (originally recorded by black artists) was to glimpse a woman in the throes of shredding her inhibitions by displaying her pain. Joplin alternately moaned, screeched, and purred the lyrics—evoking agony and ecstasy in equal measure. She lured hordes of both male and female fans; the latter copied her wardrobe (feather boas, flowered shifts, and strand upon strand of costume jewelry) and a bit of her bawdy toughness. “It was seeing Janis Joplin that made me resolve, once and for all, not to get my hair straightened,” recalled critic Ellen Willis.  

But adulation did not make Joplin happy. “Onstage I make love to 25,000 people,” she told a reporter, “then I go home alone.” After a half-decade of performing, her voice was reduced to a rasp, and she was punctuating road trips with frequent shots of heroin and hard liquor. Once famous for a manner both brash and gentle, Joplin had turned into a bitter and desperate woman. In 1970, she died from an overdose of heroin. Like other rock stars who killed themselves in similar accidents (Elvis Presley and Jimi Hendrix, most prominently), she could not bear the thought of living in the twilight after her surge into the spotlight was spent.

Yet millions of young rock fans experienced rock and roll not as romantic tragedy but as a series of tiny discoveries. They quoted and sang scraps of lyrics at school, work, and in bed; melodies, rhythms, and chord changes became elements of a secret language that lost everything in the translation.

Consider the tangled history of “Louie Louie,” a song written and first recorded in 1956 by Richard Berry, a black musician from Los Angeles, with his band, the Pharodas. At home in LA’s multiracial potpourri, Berry heard a local Filipino group that sang mostly in Spanish play a version of the tune. He reworked the melody into a mixture of calypso (a popular craze at the time) and a cha-cha, then added new lyrics. A Jamaican sailor tells a sympathetic bartender named Louie about the love who waits for him at home: “Three nights and days we sailed the sea. Me think of girl constantly. On the ship, I dream she there. I smell the rose in her hair. Louie, Louie, me gotta go.”

The song had a catchy Caribbean beat, the meld of Latin and African styles. But it was heard mainly on the West Coast and sold a modest 40,000 copies. Berry, who received just two cents per record, moved on to other projects. But a young white singer named Rockin’ Robin Roberts found a copy of “Louie, Louie” in a remainder bin near Seattle and decided to make the tune his own. Roberts willed the lyrics instead of crooning them and added the phrase, “Let’s give it to ’em, right now!” which turned the song into a sexual anthem of sorts. In the Pacific Northwest, his version became a regional hit.

One spring morning in 1963, the Kingsmen cut another recording of “Louie, Louie” in their hometown of Portland, Oregon, and unintentionally
created a rock legend. While rehearsing the tune, Jack Ely, the band's lead singer, had to strain to reach the microphone above him; fatigue and the braces on his teeth caused him to slur the lyrics even more. The drummer and lead guitarist were nervous and so performed more crudely than in their many live gigs. Having finished the unpolished run-through, the Kingsmen were amazed to hear their manager rave, "That was great, man, you never did that song better." Disk jockeys were soon playing the song as a novelty.

Through a manic whim of fortune, the Kingsmen's version of "Louie Louie" rapidly shed its status as a joke recording and became the second-best-selling single in the country. The rough instrumental was, no doubt, part of the reason; it made the Kingsmen sound like a band at the climax of a long night—careening somewhere between ecstasy and exhaustion. But what made the song unforgettable was Ely's incomprehensible vocal. What was that guy singing? Mythical lyrics proliferated. Most were pornographic, transforming the lovesick sailor into an emblem of every teenaged boy's lust-filled fantasies. Parents and ministers protested, and J. Edgar Hoover's FBI soon took up the case. Following more than two years of an investigation that employed the latest in audio technology, the bureau concluded that the lyrics were "unintelligible at any speed." Remarkably, no FBI agent ever questioned Jack Ely.

Such stupidity helped ensure "Louie Louie" a long and prosperous life. If the raunchy-sounding song was officially deemed a cultural menace, then it had to be good. In decades to come, over 200 different versions were recorded—by punk bands, surf bands, swing bands, Latin bands, Russian bands, French bands, two college marching bands, and the comedian John Belushi for the soundtrack of the movie Animal House. When Richard Berry died in 1997, the New York Times graced him with a lengthy obituary, solely because of his creation of a sea chantey then more than four decades old. Berry had lived to see "Louie Louie" enshrined in the cultural pantheon of the '60s—a mediocre song that became an underground phenomenon and grew over time into a quirky kind of generational statement. Therein lay the beauty of rock and roll; anyone of a certain age could appreciate the joke.

* * *

But a more serious cultural insurgency gradually sprouted alongside the ephemeral variety. Some young rebels aspired to build self-regulating communities that would show both their myopic elders and their timid peers the glories of an authentic existence—free of an addiction to the mass market and the quiet desperation of individuals floundering in a harshly competitive society. Toward the end of the 1960s and into the next decade, new ways of living, dressing, working, celebrating, and organizing a family flourished in dozens of urban neighborhoods and a scattering of rural places.
In such experimental gestures, the youth culture articulated what Herman Marcuse—a German émigré philosopher whose writings were then popular—called "the Great Refusal—the protest against that which is." In an economy whose abundance should be equally shared, millions might cooperate to construct a more soulful, more sensual world. In 1968, the French radical Daniel Cohn-Bendit put it well, "I am a revolutionary because it is the best way of living."

Many Americans who were young and black also revolted by proudly asserting their identity as African. "The way we talk, the way we walk, sing, dance, pray, laugh, eat, make love, and finally, most important, the way we look make up our cultural heritage," wrote Harlem actress Barbara Ann Teer. Unlike the conservative clothing and close-cropped hair styles long favored by the Nation of Islam, the new black style was innovative and flamboyant. Men and women grew long, bushy Afros or "naturals" and donned dashikis, caftans, turbans, and jewelry made from such materials as ivory and cowrie shells that evoked the continent of their ancestors. Urban radio stations played soul tunes that sang the praises of "blackness," and the tricolor of red-black-and-green (created in the 1920s by pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey) appeared on countless medallions and banners. Small community businesses sprang up to sell these products—and helped seed the dream of a separate economy that might link up with the independent nations of Africa. In black neighborhoods, "brother" and "sister" became the common form of greeting, as if all black Americans were members of the same, close-knit congregation.

Meanwhile, a new breed of artists built institutions they hoped would stir racial pride and train cultural militants. The erstwhile beat playwright/poet Le Roi Jones changed his name to Amiri Baraka ("blessed prince") and founded a black theater, an African Free School, a literary magazine, and a publishing company—all dedicated to what he called "a radical reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic." In Baraka's own writing, that "reordering" sometimes veered into anti-Semitism and rhetorical posturing. The poet Sonia Sanchez helped to launch Black Studies programs at several colleges, where her limpid, passionate verses became a staple of the curriculum: "We are sudden stars you and i exploding in our blue black skins."

The most popular creation of black cultural radicals may have been a new holiday. In 1966, Maulana Ron Karenga, an activist from Los Angeles, created Kwanzaa to replace the "alienated gift-giving" that, in his view, corrupted the observance of Christmas in many black families. Inspired by African harvest festivals, celebrants of Kwanzaa (which derives from a Swahili phrase meaning "first fruits") practiced a week-long set of rituals—including the lighting of black, red, and green candles; drinking from a Unity Cup; and the exchange of hand-made gifts at a feast of foods drawn from different regions of the African diaspora. Karenga hoped the holiday would foster a sep-
arate African identity unmoored to the traditions of white America. But Kwan-
zaa caught on in numerous black families who attended Christian churches
and continued to give out Christmas presents.43

Thousands of young people, mostly white, who rejected the norms of
"straight America" took their own path to a separate identity—by living together
in communes. The phenomenon mirrored the whimsical diversity of the youth
culture itself. Individual bands of communards lived in teepees, geodesic domes,
ramshackle and sometimes hand-made farmhouses, buses, and in crowded ur-
ban apartments. Some supported themselves through subsistence farming or
selling marijuana; others published newspapers, operated medical clinics, ran
health-food restaurants, bookstores, garages, or day-care centers. The settlements
were motivated by a wealth of inspirations and ideologies: Christian, Buddhist,
the spiritual beliefs of Native American tribes, anarchism, pacifism, feminism,
and a ferocious desire to end the war in Vietnam. By the early 1970s, some
30,000 communes—large and small, rural and urban—served as home and, of-
ten, workplace for over three-quarters of a million people.44

Despite its miscellany, this was a movement of shared impulses. Radical
equality headed the list. Nearly all communards believed that men and women
should share the work—whether building houses, feeding babies, or recruiting
new members. Often, child-rearing too became a collective responsibility,
and kids were encouraged to speak up about their grievances and to take
on any chores they could handle. At one commune near Boston, a seven-
year-old girl complained at the weekly meeting that adults were gobbling up
all the ice cream. To a man who protested he didn’t have a sweet tooth, the
child responded, “But that’s not the issue. There is never enough... Don’t
be defensive with me!” Some communards were steered by a charismatic indi-
vidual, but virtually all of them defied outside authorities—governments, cor-
porations, established churches—when they could get away with it. On the
1970 U.S. Census form, one group named its cat as “head of household.”45

In certain ways, the communes of the 1960s and early ’70s belonged to
a long tradition of utopian settlements in America, stretching back before the
Civil War. Residents sought to practice the ideal ends they preached: to pro-
duce much of what one consumed, to gain a living from the land without
destroying it, to enjoy sex without “owning” one’s lover, to demonstrate that
the cooperative ethic could gradually usher in a future of familial bliss, to be
true to one’s own natural instincts. However, the pioneers of most earlier “in-
tentional communities” had envisioned a logically planned, neatly ordered
society that would prohibit antisocial behavior. In a best-selling novel pub-
lished in 1888, Edward Bellamy described the citizens of his imagined utopia,
“Ceasing to be predatory in their habits, they became coworkers, and found
in fraternity, at once, the science of wealth and happiness.”46

In contrast, the young commune dwellers of the 1960s and after saw the
squelching of individual desires as a major reason to condemn “straight”
America and escape its clutches. The freedom to take drugs and have guilt-free sex with one's fellow communards often rivaled the attraction of sharing one's labor and resources equally. Stephen Gaskin, leader of The Farm, a large settlement in rural Tennessee, viewed the smoking of marijuana as a sacred right: "We believe that if a vegetable and an animal want to get together and can be heavier together than either one of them alone, it shouldn't be anyone's business."47 For both genders and all ages, nudity, even while working in the collective garden, was accepted as "natural" and thus virtuous. Most communes aspired more to reclaiming Eden than to perfecting the social order. If alternative arrangements didn't liberate the senses, they were hardly worth the effort.48

The tension between personal freedom and the collective ideal helped doom most communes to a short, if compelling, existence. Some settlements found it hard to draw a line between eccentricity and mental illness; Morning Star East, a community in the mountains of New Mexico, was home to a man "who lived in a hole in the ground and ate nothing but dry pancake mix with syrup."49 The lack of privacy in urban communes increasingly rankled residents who had grown up in middle-class homes where they could shut others out of a room of their own. So did the hardships of rural living without the benefits of modern technology. In Morning Star East, it froze in winter and the main source of firewood lay thirty miles away over a bad road. Monogamy usually triumphed over the doctrine of free love, particularly for women and the parents of small children.

By the late 1970s, a majority of communes had dissolved, while others survived only by filling a small niche in the market economy. Residents of The Farm, for example, manufactured tie-dyed garments, practiced midwifery, and sold books and pamphlets on ecological farming. Typically, communal property reverted to private uses; the New Buffalo commune, located on picturesque land near Taos, New Mexico, became a bed-and-breakfast inn, catering to hip tourists.

But the import of such places stretched beyond their settings—whether wood-heated mountain A-frames or aging, big-city apartments reeking with the smell of organic herbs and musty carpets. Communards believed they could set up a household and earn a living without compromising their ideals. As with all such yearnings, their desire was imbued with childish naïveté—and could only have taken flight at a time of unprecedented prosperity. Yet, it could also be breathtakingly seductive. Cultural rebels, from the Beats to Afrocentrists to commune-dwellers, refused to wait for most Americans to see the necessity and joy of personal emancipation, as they defined it. Their determination to create exemplars of what early civil rights organizers had called a "beloved community" reflected aspirations common to every religion and to most new nations. Their failure was unsurprising. But the desire endures.
In his inaugural address in 1961, President John F. Kennedy sounded a call for selfless dedication to national renewal—posed significantly in terms of generational mission. “Let the word go forth,” the new president declared, that “the torch has been passed to a new generation.” And then, in the best-remembered line of the entire speech, he proclaimed: “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.”

This summons to self-sacrificing idealism appealed to many young Americans coming of age in the 1960s, though the forms in which their response was expressed would vary widely. Some joined the newly established Peace Corps, and worked for low pay and in primitive conditions in “developing countries” abroad. Others, later in the decade, would join VISTA, the domestic equivalent of the Peace Corps launched as part of the war on poverty, and headed off to do good works in Appalachia and urban ghettos. The Peace Corps and VISTA tended to draw the most recruits from the same campuses as did the early New Left: the University of California at Berkeley, for example, was the single most important source of volunteers for the Peace Corps in the early 1960s.2

The same impulse that led some to volunteer for government-sponsored experiments in social service and community organizing led others to join insurgent movements for civil rights and peace. Many young volunteers in the civil rights movement felt, at least in the first flush of activism, that their efforts were welcomed by the new administration in Washington. Even some who protested against the Kennedy administration’s bellicose foreign policy in those years, demanding instead an end to the nuclear arms race, were encouraged to believe that the president, somewhere in his heart, sympathized with them. When several hundred protesters from the Student Peace Union (SPU) picketed the White House on a wintry day in February 1962, the pres-
ident told his kitchen staff to send out of an urn full of hot coffee to sustain their spirits. The SPU reprinted and sent out to supporters an article from the New York Times about antinuclear protests that claimed that “President Kennedy is listening at least.”

One of the more enduring historical clichés about the 1960s concerns the “alienation” of young radical activists from their elders and from mainstream American values and goals. Although young Americans in the 1960s were not the first generation in history to feel that they were more sensitive to hypocrisy and injustice than their elders, they were certainly unique in the degree to which they expressed their newly awakened political aspirations in terms of generational identity. It is easy to assume that the New Left’s political outlook was rooted in a rebellion against familial or even all adult authority. “Don’t trust anyone over 30” is, after all, one of the best-remembered slogans that came out of the New Left—specifically, the Free Speech Movement (FSM) protests at Berkeley in the fall of 1964. The Free Speech Movement grew, in significant measure, out of the civil rights movement; several of its leading figures, including undergraduate Mario Savio, had spent the previous summer in Mississippi in SNCC’s “Freedom Summer” voter registration campaign. Most of the FSM’s tactics, rhetoric, and songs, came out of the civil rights struggle. At a climactic moment in the FSM’s confrontation with the Berkeley administration, as students sat in at a university administration building, popular folksinger and political activist Joan Baez stood outside on the steps encouraging them with a rendition of Bob Dylan’s civil rights anthem “The Times They Are a-Changin’”:

Come mothers and fathers
Throughout the land
And don’t criticize
What you can’t understand
Your sons and your daughters
Are beyond your command
Your old road is rapidly aging
Please get out of the new one
If you can’t lend your hand
For the times they are a-changin’

In the early 1960s, student activists were brash and impatient, and possessed a collective sense of self-assurance that could shade easily into self-righteousness. The songs they listened to often bristled with youthful bravado and defiance (“Your sons and your daughters/are beyond your command”). But the sense that some bitter, absolute, and unbridgeable political gap divided the generations was, in fact, not evident in those first years of the decade. It took a succession of emotional and political blows in the early to mid-1960s to redirect the youthful spirit of idealistic commitment.
away from the official agendas of the “liberal establishment” in Washington and elsewhere.

To return to the example of Berkeley in 1964, slogans and songs aside, FSM activists actually did trust a good number of people over 30, and also expected them to lend a hand in the struggle for social change. And in this sense of connection with their elders, the FSM activists were quite typical of the New Left. Yale Medical School psychologist Kenneth Keniston undertook a study of young radicals in the mid-1960s, and concluded that most came out of close, achievement-oriented families of liberal or, in some instances, radical political persuasion. Typically, the children in such families wholeheartedly identified with their parents’ values, though they sometimes felt their parents had not put those values to consistent or effective use. In adolescence, Keniston noted, “their rebellion characteristically consisted in using against their parents the parents’ own principles, and inspiring their guilt.”

That also serves as a good description of the FSM’s strategy against the administration at UC Berkeley. The students rose up because they felt that the university, in seeking to restrict political advocacy on campus, had fallen short of their high expectations of its purposes. They were offended when university president Clark Kerr described the modern university as part of the “knowledge industry.” Kerr’s choice of imagery was a rather accurate description of the institution he led, with its increasingly close ties to Califor-
nia business interests and federal defense contractors. But it rankled those students who assumed that their purpose in attending the university had something to do with acquiring wisdom and finding personal meaning in life. Notwithstanding the already prevalent beards-and-sandals media stereotype of protesting students, in their attitudes toward the purpose of higher education they were the traditionalists, while the button-down Clark Kerr was the radical innovator. Students at Berkeley, FSM leader Mario Savio declared in an impassioned speech on the steps of Sproul Hall, “don’t mean to be bought by some clients of the university. . . . We’re human beings.”6 Human beings, in Savio’s view, sought knowledge for its own sake, not as a commodity to peddle in the corporate marketplace (as a study of students arrested in the FSM protests showed, they had higher grades, on average, than nonprotesting students). The FSM’s attitudes were shared by many of their teachers. Indeed, a central element of the FSM strategy against the Berkeley administration was to win support from UC professors; when the faculty senate voted overwhelmingly toward the end of the fall 1964 semester to endorse the FSM demands for free speech on campus, they were greeted as they left their meeting by 5000 applauding students.7

But by the later 1960s, the times were “a-changin” in ways that would make the FSM protest seem tame and old-fashioned in contrast. The sense of the legitimacy and permanence of the old political and intellectual order gave way rapidly in the minds of tens of thousands of young people. Within the New Left, the chief organizational expression and beneficiary of this trend would be a group called Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).

When SDS was created in 1960, few people took notice, even on the Left, and even fewer expected that it would have much of a future. Al Haber, an undergraduate at the University of Michigan, had joined a tiny group of campus leftists called the Student League for Industrial Democracy (SLID) a few years earlier. SLID was subsidized by the League for Industrial Democracy, a pro-labor advocacy group dating its origins back to the Progressive Era and funded by some of the more liberal trade unions. Haber was frustrated by SLID’s inaction and lack of vision, and one of his first acts upon taking over as the group’s director in 1960 was to rename it SDS. For the public debut of SDS, Haber organized a conference in Ann Arbor in the spring of 1960 that drew together white northern students and some of the black students who had been leading the sit-in movement in the South. Among those attending the conference was the student editor of the Michigan Daily, a thoughtful and ambitious junior named Tom Hayden. Hayden joined SDS soon afterward. The following year he went South to do what he could in the name of the group to support the black student movement. Over the course of the following year, SDS remained a very small and obscure organization, but it began to attract a talented circle of activists, drawn by the leaders’ open and nondogmatic commitment to rebuilding a radical presence on the campuses.
The New Left, as embodied in early SDS, was a profoundly American movement, inspired by the civil rights movement, and fashioning its early political beliefs from a combination of American radical traditions. SDS’s commitment to creating a “participatory democracy” drew from sources ranging from the nineteenth-century transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau to the twentieth-century Progressive educator John Dewey.

At the same time, the American New Left was part of a broader transformation of politics and culture that linked young people in the United States to those in many other countries, on both sides of the Iron Curtain. From its earliest days, SDS saw itself as part of an international New Left that challenged the radical orthodoxies of earlier generations.

One of the formative documents shaping the international outlook of SDS leaders was written by the radical Columbia University sociologist C. Wright Mills, who had earlier coined the phrase “the power elite.” In 1960 he wrote a “Letter to the New Left” that was published in the British radical journal *New Left Review* and later reprinted by SDS as a pamphlet. Mills’s purpose in writing was to challenge the residual belief in radical circles, inherited from nineteenth-century Marxism, that the industrial working class would be the main force behind any movement for meaningful social change.

“Who is it that is getting disgusted with what Marx called ‘all the old crap’?” Mills asked provocatively in his essay. “Who is it that is thinking and acting in radical ways? All over the world—in the [Soviet] bloc, outside the bloc and in between—the answer’s the same: it is the young intelligentsia.”

Mills pointed to protest demonstrations and movements then emerging in Japan, South Korea, Turkey, Britain, the United States, and the Soviet bloc. Everywhere he saw the same groups in motion: “students and young professionals and writers.” For a truly “new” Left to thrive, radicals were going to have to “forget Victorian Marxism” and accept that in the world of the late twentieth-century, it was young people who were the “real live agencies of historic change.”

In the spring of 1962 several dozen student delegates met at a United Auto Workers educational camp in Port Huron, Michigan, to debate a proposed program for SDS, largely authored by Tom Hayden, who by this point had become the group’s president. After several days of debate, the young radicals arrived at consensus, adopting what became known as the Port Huron Statement. Over the next few years, tens of thousands of mimeographed copies of the statement were circulated on college campuses, and, as much as any single document, it defined the politics of the emerging New Left.

It began with a statement of generational identity: “We are people of this generation,” Hayden wrote, “bred in at least modest comfort, housed in the universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit.” Part of what followed consisted of a rather unsurprising political wish list for a group on the Left: the delegates endorsed increased spending on social welfare, decreased spending on the military, and civil rights legislation. What would
later attract attention to the statement was not the programmatic details, but the emphasis on “values.” “Men have unrealized potential for self-cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding, and creativity. . . . The goal of man and society should be human independence. . . . finding a meaning in life that is personally authentic.” After reviewing the inadequacy of the “old slogans” left over from the communist and socialist movements of the 1930s, the statement called for the creation of a new kind of radical movement dedicated to creating a genuinely “participatory democracy” in which individual citizens could help make “those social decisions determining the quality and direction” of their lives. Colleges and universities, SDSers argued in the Port Huron Statement, had a vitally important role in creating such a movement, since “a]ny new left in America must be, in large measure, a left with real intellectual skills, committed to deliberativeness, honesty, reflection as working tools. The university permits the political life to be an adjunct to the academic one, and action to be informed by reason.”

Over the next several years, SDS grew slowly, as its founders experimented with various political strategies. Some SDSers, including Hayden, moved into poverty-stricken neighborhoods in northern cities, in an attempt to create “an interracial movement of the poor” that was modeled on SNCC’s community-organizing efforts in the South. Relations with the parent organization, the League for Industrial Democracy, were strained because SDS seemed insufficiently anticommunist to the LID elders (many of whom had cut their ideological teeth in battles between Communist and Socialist groups in the 1930s). By 1965 the two had parted ways. But up through that spring, SDS enjoyed increasing visibility and respect in the liberal community. UAW president Walter Reuther helped fund its community-organizing projects; and in the pages of The Nation, SDS was described, along with SNCC, as a collection of “thoroughly indigenous radicals: tough, democratic, independent, creative, activist, unsentimental.”

The New Left was, of course, always much larger than SDS; indeed, one of the defining characteristics of student radicalism in the 1960s was its high degree of decentralization and spontaneity (SDSers played very little role, for example, in the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, or in subsequent protests on the Berkeley campus). Bearing that qualification in mind, SDS’s history still provides useful guidelines in charting the growth and development of the broader movement.

The events in Vietnam in the spring of 1965 proved a turning point for SDS and the New Left as a whole. As the war escalated, so did debate at home over its wisdom. The events of recent years had contributed to a new willingness among many Americans, and especially among the young, to challenge established authority, and to scrutinize political decisions in moral terms. Some of those who spoke out against the war in Vietnam were pacifists, who opposed all wars; others felt that United States policy in Vietnam was a reversion to big power bullying tactics and the worst excesses of Cold War para-
noia. Johnson’s decision to dispatch 15,000 marines to the Dominican Republic in April to quell domestic disturbances in that small Caribbean nation only added to the suspicion in antiwar circles that the U.S. government was bent on throwing its weight around as a kind of self-appointed policeman to the world. The U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic was soon overshadowed by events in Vietnam, and later virtually forgotten, but it loomed large in the eyes of LBJ’s critics in 1965. Arkansas Senator J. William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and soon to become an important opponent of the war in Vietnam, first broke with Johnson over the Dominican Republic intervention, calling it a “tragedy” that had been sold to the country “by a lack of candor and by misinformation.”

In late March, 3000 students turned out for a “teach-in” on the Vietnam war at the University of Michigan. Although supporters as well as opponents of the administration’s policies were welcome to make their views known at the event, the overwhelming sentiment of the gathering was against the war. The teach-in movement soon spread to over a hundred other campuses across the country. In April SDS sponsored an antiwar march in Washington, D.C. that attracted 20,000 participants, the largest antiwar demonstration in the nation’s history until that point. The early anti-war protests were greatly influenced by the civil rights movement. “What kind of America is it whose response to poverty and oppression in South Vietnam is napalm and defoliation,” the official “Call” for the SDS march on Washington asked, while its “response to poverty and oppression in Mississippi is . . . silence?” SNCC’s Bob Moses was one of the speakers at the April rally, and SDS president Paul Potter told the crowd that “the reason there are twenty thousand people here today and not a hundred or none at all is because five years ago in the South students began to build a social movement to change the system.”

SDS was now the best-known radical group in the country. Its growing prominence attracted attention, both hostile and friendly. In May 1965 the FBI began to wiretap SDS’s telephone. In the 1965–1966 school year, its national office in Chicago received a flood of letters from across the country from individuals and groups eager to join. A typical letter came from an Illinois high school student, who wrote in early 1966 asking for information about SDS. “I feel so strongly about civil rights, the war on poverty, etc.,” she explained, “but I do so little for them . . . .”

I listen to Pete Seeger’s “We Shall Overcome” album, deck my bedroom with freedom posters and buttons, and argue in my English class. (I am one of two out of twenty-five who is pro-Civil Rights.) . . . My mind is torn as to whether we should be in Viet Nam. But I do feel that war is outdated and morally wrong. Knowing that it is my duty to form my opinion, I would like and appreciate your help.

The national membership of SDS grew to about 15,000 that year, perhaps triple the membership of a year earlier. And the organization became,
significantly more diverse, in the location and the kinds of school where its chapters took root. Early on, most SDS chapters were to be found in places like the University of Michigan, which had long histories of left-wing student activism. Now, students at schools like Dodge City Community College in Kansas and Ventura College in southern California were also forming SDS chapters. As a Ventura student wrote to the SDS national office that fall: “What I have read and heard of your group leads me to to believe we think much in the same direction.” On their own, students at Ventura had formed a group called “Free Students for America,” and now they wanted to affiliate with SDS. “The basic aims of [the Ventura group] are the removal of all American troops from Viet Nam, the use of aid rather than soldiers to combat the growth of totalitarian governments throughout the world, the affirmation of the right of any individual not to kill and not to be forced to serve in any military organization.” In sum, the Ventura “Free Students” wanted to join SDS because “we feel there is considerably more creative power in the unity of many groups than there is in many separate groups.”

Thus, for the most part, SDS didn’t have to send out organizers to recruit new members; the new members came to SDS on their own. These new recruits (dubbed the “prairie power” contingent because so many of them came from places other than the usual centers of radical strength) were less likely to share the theoretical sophistication or intellectual ambitions of the group’s founding generation. The new breed tended to be unschooled in and impatient with radical doctrine, intensely moralistic, suspicious of “elitism” and “bureaucracy”, and immersed in what was just starting to be referred to as the “counterculture” of casual drug use, sexual experimentation, and rock music. In contrast to the left-wing movements of the 1930s, where young radicals prided themselves on their analytic abilities and command of the intricacies of Marxist theory, a kind of emotional and moral plain-speaking was the preferred rhetorical style among SDSers.

SDS was changing, but chapter reports that flowed into the national office from around the country in 1965–1966 suggested that in most places, its members still thought of their role on campus more in terms of education than confrontation. The student organizer for the University of Rhode Island SDS chapter wrote in February 1966, outlining the group’s activities since the start of the new school year:

**October [1965]:** Folk concert and food sale to support member now working with MFDP [Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party]. Silent vigil (in coordination with nationwide protest) to end the war in Vietnam.

**November:** Sponsor Rev. Arthur Lawson, Fellowship of Reconciliation, speaking on visit to Vietnam. Eleven go to Washington to participate in the SANE [National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy] demonstration.

**December:** Organized open discussion on the war in Vietnam.
January [1966]: Sponsored a... discussion on conscientious objection...

February 15: Tom Cornell, Catholic Worker (burned draft card) to speak.16

If SDS had ceased to exist in the spring of 1966, historians looking back through its archives might well have concluded that the organization functioned primarily as a youth affiliate and support group for the pacifist and civil rights movements, rather than any kind of self-consciously revolutionary, let alone violence-prone organization.

That was to change within the next year. In a short time, the very language of rational persuasion and nonviolence came to be regarded with suspicion by many in SDS, as it did throughout much of the New Left. The Port Huron Statement had called in 1962 for the creation of “a left with real intellectual skills, committed to deliberativeness, honesty, reflection as working tools.” But five years later, such sentiments had gone out of style. One of the new leaders of SDS, Carl Davidson, declared in 1967 that radical students had come to understand “the impossibility of freedom in the university so long as it remained tied to the interests of America’s corporate and

Stokely Carmichael of SNCC (left) and Bobby Seale of the Black Panther Party (right), prominent black revolutionaries, 1967. Source: Jeffrey Blankfort
military ruling elite." Abandoning the early SDS vision, Davidson now called
for a strategy of "common struggle with the liberation movements of the
world" by means of "the disruption, dislocation and destruction of the mili-
tary's access to the manpower, intelligence, or resources of our universities."17

Throughout the 1960s the fate of the white New Left was closely bound
to that of the struggle for black equality. Without the sit-ins of 1960, SDS
would likely have died a-borning. Without the Freedom Summer of 1964,
there probably would have been no Free Speech Movement at Berkeley. Writ-
ing in 1966, white radical journalist Jack Newfield argued that within the
New Left "one word, above all others, has the magic to inspire blind loyalty
and epic myth. SNCC."18 However much changed in the politics of the white
New Leftists from the early to the late 1960s, the one constant was their im-
pulse to look to their black counterparts for direction and validation. Stu-
dents willing to follow SNCC organizer Stokely Carmichael into nonviolent
battle with the forces of white supremacy in Mississippi continued to follow
his lead, at least rhetorically, when he espoused a strategy of armed self-
defense in the urban ghettos of the North.

After the summer of 1964, SNCC veterans began to turn against the prin-
ciples of interracialism and integration that had guided them since the group's
founding in 1960. During Freedom Summer, whites actually outnumbered
blacks in SNCC's voter registration projects in Mississippi; as a result, the
campaign attracted the fulsome attention of the national media, as well as
the support of many prominent white politicians in the north. That had been
foreseen by SNCC's leaders, and was in fact the point of inviting white vol-
unteers to Mississippi in the first place. But the very success of the strategy
prompted some SNCC leaders to ask why it required placing middle-class
whites in harm's way to prick the national conscience. Where had all those
television news cameramen been when only blacks were being beaten, in-
carcerated, and murdered in Mississippi? Stokely Carmichael concluded that
depending on sympathetic whites for political cover was, in itself, a concess-
ton to racism.19

The last real opportunity for damping down the fires of racial separatism
in SNCC came at the Democratic convention in Atlantic City at the end of
the summer of 1964. SNCC activists had helped organize the Mississippi Free-
dom Democratic Party (MDFP) to challenge the credentials of the regular
Mississippi Democrats who had been chosen in the customary all-white state
primary election. Johnson, fearing the defection of southern white voters, saw
to it that the MDFP's challenge was quashed, although he did offer them two
at-large delegate seats at the convention, an offer the activists indignantly re-
 fused. After Atlantic City, black and white radicals alike were quick to con-
demn liberal Democrats as hypocrites whose commitment to genuine racial
equality extended only to the symbolic. If moral persuasion had no effect,
SNCC leaders concluded, they were going to have turn to other means. "We
want more than 'token' positions,” declared SNCC’s Charles Sherrod. “We want power for our people.”

SNCC was also coming under the influence of the charismatic black nationalist leader Malcolm X. On a goodwill tour of independent black nations in Africa in the fall of 1964, SNCC leaders had a chance encounter with Malcolm, who was there on a tour of his own. Although often bitterly critical of the civil rights movement’s adult leadership, Malcolm courted the young SNCC leaders. Just days before his assassination in February 1965, Malcolm made a rare appearance in the South, speaking at a rally in Selma at SNCC’s invitation. Malcolm’s militancy, including the advocacy of armed self-defense, and his pan-Africanism (the belief that all Africans shared a common destiny and should be linked politically) greatly appealed to SNCC’s young black activists. In the last year of his life, Malcolm abandoned many of the antiwhite sentiments he had espoused before his expulsion from Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam organization. But he had not changed his mind on the question of whether blacks and whites should work together in the same groups. “I know,” he declared in his autobiography, “that every time that whites join a black organization, you watch, pretty soon the blacks will be leaning on the whites to support it, and before you know it a black may be up front with a title, but the whites, because of their money, are the real controllers.”

Malcolm’s violent death only added to his political luster. John Lewis, who remained one of the more moderate voices within SNCC in 1965, commented after Malcolm’s death that, “more than any other single personality,” he had been “able to articulate the aspirations, bitterness, and frustrations of the Negro people,” as well as representing “a living link between Africa and the civil rights movement in this country.”

SNCC’s political outlook and its public image changed dramatically in the summer of 1966. Stokely Carmichael had defeated John Lewis that spring to become SNCC’s new chairman. Lewis, southern-born, soft-spoken, and a firm believer in nonviolence had come to be seen by many in SNCC as the symbol of a passing age: Carmichael, urban, northern, fast-talking, and fed up with both nonviolence and interracialism, was now the man of the hour. In late May, in one of his first official acts, Carmichael withdrew SNCC from the planning sessions for a White House conference on civil rights. To movement insiders and the media, that decision underlined the growing differences between SNCC and more mainstream civil rights organizations, but outside the movement relatively few Americans noticed. Something more dramatic was needed to get the message out that SNCC was no longer the same organization it had been in the days of “We Shall Overcome” idealism.

Carmichael found the moment he was waiting for when James Meredith, a black Air Force veteran whose enrollment at the University of Mississippi in 1962 had provoked a violent white riot on the campus, decided on his own to stage a “March Against Fear” across Mississippi. Meredith hoped to
encourage the blacks he encountered along his route from Memphis, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi, to register to vote. But he was only in the second day of his trek when he was wounded by a white gunman on a lonely stretch of Mississippi highway. Meredith, regarded by many in the civil rights movement as an eccentric loner, had undertaken his journey without any organizational backing. Now SCLC's Martin Luther King, Jr., CORE's Floyd McKissick, and SNCC's Stokely Carmichael pledged to carry out his mission, and march on to Jackson, Mississippi.

For the next 10 days the marchers, whose numbers ranged day to day from a few dozen to several hundred, made their way toward Jackson without further incident. The reporters covering the march at first assumed this would be simply a reprise of the previous year's Selma-to-Montgomery march, its larger purposes to be defined, as in the earlier event, by Martin Luther King's oratory. But Carmichael had other ideas. A SNCC activist named Willie Ricks had already been firing up crowds along the route by shouting the slogan "Black Power!" When Carmichael was arrested and briefly incarcerated in Greenwood, Mississippi, he decided to follow Ricks's example. That night, at a rally in Greenwood, he electrified a crowd of hundreds of black supporters by announcing "What we are gonna start saying now is Black Power." For the remainder of the march, it was Carmichael, not King, who set the tone. "What do you want?" SNCC organizers would shout at rallies during the rest of the march. "Black Power!" the crowds would roar back.24

The Black Power slogan, soon echoed by other groups on the militant wing of the movement such as CORE, terrified whites who associated it with violent urban outbreaks like the 1965 riot in Watts, and took it as the prophecy of full-scale race war. But the meaning of the term was not nearly as well defined in the minds of its supporters as the fearful reaction it inspired would suggest. To some advocates, Black Power meant little more than "black pride." This definition of black power could be satisfied by defining an identity around a distinctive African-American sense of history and culture. Others saw in Black Power the same tradition of ethnic cohesion and mutual aid that had been of such help to groups like the Irish and the Jews in their earlier breakthroughs to social mobility. None of this required a revolutionary transformation of American society; in the 1968 presidential election, Republican candidate Richard Nixon found it politically expedient to advocate his own version of "black power," which he defined as "an expansion of black ownership" of businesses, or "black capitalism."25

Black capitalism was not what Stokely Carmichael had in mind when he called for Black Power. But what he did mean by the slogan seemed to change month by month, and audience by audience. In July 1967 Carmichael traveled to Havana, Cuba, where, along with representatives of revolutionary groups from Central and South America, he was seated as an honorary delegate to the meetings of the Organization of Latin Ameri-
can Solidarity (OLAS). In Havana, Carmichael expressed his sympathy for Cuban-style communism and described the movement for Black Power in the United States as part of a worldwide struggle against "white Western imperialist society."  

Carmichael had not talked with anyone else in SNCC's leadership about his trip to Havana, or the positions he intended to take there. Julius Lester, who acted as Carmichael's press spokesman in Havana, was privately appalled by the SNCC leader's ideological posturing. As he confided to his diary: "I sit here with the Mick Jagger of revolution and think about all the people who believe in him, and I am frightened..." 27 Leaving Havana, Carmichael moved on to Communist China and North Vietnam, before returning, after a stopover in Africa, to the United States. There, again without prior signal to or consultation with his increasingly bewildered followers, he changed course again. At a rally in Oakland, California, the following February, Carmichael announced that "Communism is not an ideology suited for black people, period, period. Socialism is not an ideology suited for black people, period, period." Instead, he advocated "an African ideology which speaks to our blackness—nothing else. It's not a question of right or left, it's a question of black." 28

The swing to Black Power in the civil rights movement was as much a product of generational as racial conflict. Older and more established black leaders, like Martin Luther King, Jr. remained committed to an integrationist vision. This was true even within SNCC itself; Fannie Lou Hamer, 48 years old the summer of the "Black Power" march, resolutely opposed the ouster of SNCC's white staff, a position that led some younger SNCC activists to deride her as "no longer relevant" to the movement. 29 Public opinion polls taken at the height of the Black Power movement revealed that an overwhelming majority of African Americans still believed in integration as the best solution for ending racial inequality. 30 But despite that sentiment, and despite the ideological vagueness of the call for Black Power, the bloody rioting in the "long hot summers" of 1966 and 1967 led many Americans to believe that a deliberately fomented urban guerrilla war was indeed in the offing.

White liberals, many of whom were also offended by SNCC's new identification with the cause of Palestinian nationalists in the Middle East, severed their remaining ties with the group (a financial disaster for SNCC, hastening its demise). But those on the white New Left, for whom SNCC had functioned as "epic myth," were confronted with a more difficult choice. They (or people they knew or knew about) had been sufficiently committed to risk their lives in Mississippi when the call came from SNCC for Freedom Summer volunteers; was SNCC's advocacy of revolutionary violence now enough to scare them off?

By the summer of 1967, most white New Leftists would probably have agreed that the old interracial and nonviolent civil rights movement was not
only over, but also had proven a failure. In the early 1960s, the inspirational language of the civil rights movement encouraged the belief that once the institutional barriers to racial equality had fallen, racism itself would rapidly wither and disappear. "All God's children," King had promised in his "I have a dream" speech in 1963, would be able to unite in singing the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, I'm free at last!" But racism had not disappeared with the subsequent passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965; instead it seemed to be growing stronger and more widespread. No longer was racism seen by New Leftists as merely a regional problem to be dealt with in the South, but as central to the identity and values of the nation as a whole. Mobs of angry whites had jeered at and stoned Dr. King during his Chicago "open housing" campaign in 1966—were they any different from the Ku Klux Klansmen who had beaten and murdered civil rights activists in Mississippi and Alabama? New Leftists might not have had the presumption of their counterparts in SNCC, who had, for some time, referred derisively to Martin Luther King as "de Lawd," but they no longer looked to him for leadership or inspiration.

Instead, like SNCC activists, SDSers and other New Leftists found it psychologically bracing to imagine themselves in alliance with the revolutionary forces of the Third World. In the course of the 1960s, many on the New Left came to regard Fidel Castro's Cuba as a heroic model of self-determination and revolutionary elan. Castro and his closest comrade, the charismatic Argentinian-born Che Guevara, had proven that a small group of militants, armed with little more than a willingness to risk all in the cause of revolution, could not only overthrow their own government, but could actually defy the great unfriendly superpower to their north. Somewhat to the dismay of his cautious friends in the Kremlin, Castro had decided to export the Cuban revolutionary model to other Third World countries, in Africa and in Latin America. Che Guevara secretly traveled to Bolivia in the fall of 1966 to inspire and lead a guerrilla war against the Bolivian military government. Before he left, he wrote a manifesto, published in Cuba in the spring of 1967, calling for the creation of "Two, Three, Many Vietnams" around the world. Che's death in Bolivia in October 1967, following his capture by the Bolivian Army, only cemented his status as martyr and icon of revolutionary internationalism. The strategic vision of a worldwide uprising of oppressed peoples in many lands—"Two, Third, Many Vietnams"—appealed to New Leftists. Those who were a minority in their own country were thus, looked at from the proper perspective, actually moving in the same direction as the overwhelming majority of the world's population.

Communist China, though never as popular with New Leftists as Castro's Cuba, served as yet another source of revolutionary inspiration. Red plastic-bound copies of Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung, published in English translation in Beijing, began to circulate in American New Left circles in
1967, especially on the West Coast. In January 1967, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, two black militants who had just formed an obscure local group in Oakland, California, called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, raised money to buy guns and ammunition by peddling copies of Mao’s “little red book” to Berkeley students. There was sometimes a trace of self-mockery among the would-be American Red Guards who carried the Little Red Book around in their hip pockets; it served more as a curiosity or a fashion statement than as a frequently consulted source of political wisdom. But its appearance was significant nonetheless as a symbol of the New Left’s desire to link up with distant and exotic battalions of revolutionary allies.

For all the talk that began to be heard of “picking up the gun,” few white radicals were actually prepared to do so. But if black militants were now prepared to arm themselves in earnest, they weren’t going to be second-guessed by their white comrades. Steve Halliwell, a graduate student in history and assistant national secretary of SDS, spent the summer of 1967 working with the SDS National Office in Chicago. Halliwell had been carrying on a running argument with one of his old professors at Columbia, Leo Haimson, a distinguished historian of the Russian Revolution. Haimson was considerably more skeptical about the prospects for revolution in the United States than his young student. But Halliwell urged the professor to consider the vulnerability of the system to acts of exemplary violence:

The USA cannot continue to send black men overseas to learn how to fight in jungles and then bring them home to kill their brothers in the ghettos—they just won’t have an army. . . . Three guys with rifles could stop the Lake Street El [Chicago’s elevated train system] every night at rush hour. I’m not suggesting that this is the substance of a revolutionary movement, but it is important that there is a growing reservoir of very militant people that can have real debilitating consequences even in small numbers.

As Halliwell’s comments suggest, the war in Vietnam was also much on his mind that summer. In fact, for many on the Left—and not just disciples of Mao—the struggle against the war and the struggle for black liberation had effectively merged.

As the New Left grew larger, it also grew more internally divided. The early 1960s vision of the movement as a “beloved community” in which all those committed to social change could join together in common effort and fellowship had come apart by mid-decade. Whites were no longer welcome in the black movement, save as outside supporters. And, within the white New Left, there were increasing tensions, if not yet any absolute division, between men and women.

When Tom Hayden sat down to write the Port Huron Statement in 1962 he had, without reflection, used a language of gender exclusivity. “Men,” he wrote, “have unrealized potential for self-cultivation, self-direction. . . .” In
using the term “men,” he did not consciously intend to exclude women, but merely applied the then all-but-universal convention of having masculine designations serve as synonyms for “human beings.” The same was true of other phrases in the statement, and commonly used in the movement, like “brotherhood.” If any of the women at Port Huron noticed, they raised no objections at the time.

Within a few years, however, many women in the New Left would ask if there was any necessary connection between the “self-cultivation” and “self-definition . . . ” of men and the aspirations of women for an equal measure of freedom and autonomy. Mary King and Casey Hayden (the latter Tom Hayden’s wife) both worked on staff for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. “Why is it in SNCC,” they asked in a position paper they circulated anonymously (fearing ridicule) at a SNCC conference in the fall of 1964, “that women who are competent, qualified, and experienced are automatically assigned to the ‘female’ kinds of jobs such as: typing, desk work, telephone work, filing, library work, cooking . . . but rarely the ‘executive’”? The answer, they suggested, was “the assumption of male superiority.”

A year later, this time writing in their own names, they circulated what they called “a kind of memo” among women in the civil rights and antiwar movements. “Having learned from the movement to think radically about the personal worth and abilities of people whose role in society had gone unchallenged before,” King and Hayden wrote, “a lot of women in the movement have begun trying to apply those lessons to their own relations with men.” Although in 1965 they considered the chances as “nil” that “we could start a movement based on anything as distant to general American thought as a sex-caste system,” they nonetheless wanted to “open up a dialogue” with other women who felt as they did.

King and Hayden were wrong in their limited expectations. Their observations struck a chord with many young women, and not a few older ones. Women’s caucuses and workshops sprang up in SDS and other movement groups in 1966–1967, and by the fall of 1967 independently organized women’s groups were meeting in Chicago, New York, and a few other cities. Very often, the early groups consisted of small circles of friends and acquaintances who would gather at one or another’s home to talk about their experiences as women in the movement and the broader American society in what became known as “consciousness-raising groups.”

Some men in the civil rights movement and the New Left were sympathetic to the call for what began to be known as “women’s liberation.” Others saw the new movement as a trivial distraction from more serious issues of racism and war. And not a few felt personally threatened, since the “dialogue” begun by women in the movement often raised intimate questions about sexual behavior and privilege. “What is the position of women in SNCC?” Stokely Carmichael joked in response to the initial Hayden–King pa-
per. "The position of women in SNCC is prone!" And, according to Mary King, his was one of the more sympathetic responses.36

Male hostility, along with the example set by the rise of Black Power, led many of the new feminists to adopt their own separatist stance in regard to men. "I once thought that all that was necessary was to make men understand that they would achieve their own liberation, too, by joining in the struggle for women's liberation," poet and activist Marge Piercy wrote in the late 1960s, "but it has come to me to seem a little too much like the chickens trying to educate the chicken farmer."37 By the late 1960s, locally organized "women's liberation" groups could be found in virtually every major city and on every college campus, sponsoring a wide range of activities, from consciousness-raising discussion groups to women's health clinics, bookstores, coffeehouses, newspapers, battered women's shelters, and more. These were evidence both of the success of the women's movement—and of the failure of the New Left to provide a welcoming environment for feminist concerns. In 1962 Tom Hayden had suggested that the quest for a sense of "personal authenticity" could be part of the glue holding together a movement for social change. But by the later 1960s, competing visions of authentic and meaningful personal existence were instead pulling the movement apart.

As blacks and whites and men and women in the movement went their own ways, they were still bound together in common opposition to the war
in Vietnam. Just how best to oppose the war was, however, often a divisive issue. Some sought to use the traditional methods of political canvassing, petitioning, and electoral politics. An organization called “Vietnam Summer” sent tens of thousands of volunteers door to door in the summer of 1967 to spread the antiwar message. That fall, voters in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and San Francisco were asked in ballot referendums whether the war should continue, and roughly 40 percent of them in both cities supported American withdrawal.38

Building an antiwar majority was a painfully slow process, and gathering signatures on petitions seemed a tepid response to the ongoing carnage in Vietnam. And, even if the majority of voters in liberal bastions like Cambridge came out in opposition to the war, it seemed unlikely to have much effect on American policy. Searching for alternatives, antiwar radicals increasingly sought to emulate the tactics that had been employed so successfully by the civil rights movement. The struggle against Jim Crow in the South had relied upon the willingness of civil rights workers to “speak truth to power,” by violating unjust laws—“putting your body on the line” in acts of courageous personal and collective confrontation of illegitimate authority.

The southern example was compelling—but misleading. In the civil rights movement, confrontation (at the lunch counter in Greensboro, on the Freedom Rides, on the streets of Birmingham and Selma) had served strategic ends. Such confrontations often capped years of patient, grassroots organizing (SNCC had spent two years in Selma, preparing the ground for the dramatic events of the spring of 1965). In the New Left and the campus antiwar movement, in contrast, media-oriented confrontation increasingly took the place of the long-term strategy and commitment displayed by the civil rights organizers.

The longer the war continued, the higher the draft calls, and the greater the number of flag-covered coffins returning to the United States from Vietnam, the more the conflict bred an atmosphere of frustration and extremism within the New Left. Vietnam was a particularly volatile issue around which to attempt to build a mass movement. Unlike the civil rights movement, which until 1965 was organized to achieve a series of concrete political and legislative goals, the antiwar movement could measure success only by one all-encompassing aim, the end of the killing in Vietnam. No partial victories were available: the movement would either force the United States government to end the war, or it would fail. As a result, the New Left wing of the peace movement swung back and forth between near-millennial expectations, and an ever darker and angrier despair. As historian Thomas Powers commented, “The violence in Vietnam seemed to elicit a similar air of violence in the United States, an appetite for extremes: people felt that history was accelerating, time was running out, great issues were reaching a point of final decision.”39
For some on the New Left, their newly acquired revolutionary convictions argued against devoting too much energy to antiwar protest, which was seen as a problem for liberals to settle; instead, they thought, revolutionaries should focus on stopping “the seventh Vietnam from now” by organizing the poor to overthrow capitalism. But others saw in the antiwar cause, or as they began to call it, “anti-imperialism,” a way to confront both the war and the social and economic system that had spawned it. Those who were “radicalized” in the struggle against the war, so the theory went, would go on to become the shock troops of the coming final struggle against capitalism. Young revolutionaries paid little attention to more experienced leftists, like the radical journalist I. F. Stone, who had been around long enough to appreciate the resilience of American capitalism. (“If the cause of world peace depends on the overthrow of American capitalism,” Stone noted drily in 1965, “there isn’t much hope for the world.”)

The trend toward ever more theatrical confrontations was already visible in the first summer of antiwar protest in 1965. After a spring of teach-ins, vigils, and peaceful marches against the war, student protesters began to look for ways to “put their bodies on the line.” As before, Berkeley pointed the way. In August 1965 several hundred protesters from the University of California had stood on railroad tracks to block oncoming troop trains rolling into the Oakland Army Base. They didn’t stop the trains, but they did create a dramatic tableau, with an element of genuine personal risk of dismemberment or death, should either a train engineer or a protester miscalculate. Steve Weissman, a veteran of Freedom Summer and one of the organizers of the train blockade, described the demonstration as a tremendous success and drew from it the following lesson:

Civil disobedience is good when it feels good—not only at the point of disruption, but also as one looks back after the euphoria and the crowds have dispersed. ... [C]ivil disobedience is more than self-indulgence; creative social dislocation that feels good will enlarge participation and limit the disillusionment and depoliticization that often follows those grueling days in court.

The standard of political effectiveness used to measure and justify the campus antiwar movement’s embrace of ever more militant tactics increasingly became the sense of gratification and commitment such tactics provided to participants, combined with the amount of coverage it guaranteed on the evening television news. There was a seductive exhilaration to feeling oneself part of a redemptive minority in the United States, allied in some intangible yet deeply felt way to that irresistible majority of peasant revolutionaries abroad who were rising up against the American empire. Some SDS leaders, like Tom Hayden, traveled to Hanoi and came back enthralled by the “fearlessness, calm determination, pride, even serenity” displayed by the Viet-
namese revolutionaries confronting the world's greatest superpower.\textsuperscript{42} Viet Cong flags began to dot the ranks of antiwar demonstrations, and young marchers provocatively chanted slogans like "Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh/The NLF is gonna win." SDS publications began to fill up with imagery of heroic guerrillas brandishing automatic weapons.

The antiwar movement, which was far broader than the New Left, included people with many different political views. There were groups of veterans, and clergy, and trade unionists, and businessmen, and many others who had no use for the extravagant rhetoric of revolutionary cultism. Even New Leftists were not universally enthralled by the romance of violent revolution. The draft resistance movement, which drew on support of religious radical groups like the Catholic Worker movement, as well as SDS and SNCC, coordinated campaigns of young men to turn in or burn their draft cards, and to refuse induction into the armed forces even at the risk of imprisonment. Draft resisters, by and large, remained true to nonviolent principles. But they too were attracted to a politics of "creative social dislocation." Many resisters were drawn to the movement precisely because of its emphasis on total commitment and an exclusive form of risk taking (only young men of draft age, after all, could join). As one draft resister described the outlook of his fellow resisters at the time, they shared "a profound suspicion and distrust of most of the usual political organizations and their analyses which so often lead to endless meetings and little or no action."\textsuperscript{43}

The dangers involved in the politics of confrontation were not lost on some veteran leaders of the New Left, although they found themselves powerless to reverse the trend. Lee Webb, a former SDS national secretary, complained in an internal document in the fall of 1965 that "SDS influences its membership to become more militant rather than more radical. . . . Calls to fight the draft, stop a troop train, burn a draft card, avoid all forms of liberalism, have become . . . the substitute for intellectual analysis and understanding."\textsuperscript{44}

But it was hard to argue with success, and confrontational politics were successful—at least on college campuses. Notwithstanding the loathing with which many Americans regarded the campus revolutionaries, SDS continued to double its membership with each new school year. By the end of 1967 SDS had grown to nearly 30,000 loosely affiliated members. And antiwar demonstrations grew larger as they grew more militant.\textsuperscript{45}

In the spring of 1967, the National Mobilization Committee Against the War, a broad coalition of radicals, liberals, and pacifists, sponsored marches against the war in New York City and San Francisco. These were well-attended and peaceful affairs. Several hundred thousand marchers followed Martin Luther King and other notables from New York City's Central Park to the United Nations to demand the immediate withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam. Antiwar leaders decided to follow up their suc-
cess with another march in the fall, this time in Washington, D.C. The October march, Mobilization leaders declared, would mark the peace movement's transition "from protest to resistance." Meanwhile, other groups around the country laid plans for local demonstrations in October to "confront the warmakers."

The antiwar offensive started with "Stop the Draft Week" in Oakland, California, protests designed to shut down the functioning of the Oakland induction center. Pacifists sat in nonviolently early in the week, and several hundred allowed themselves to be peacefully carted off by police. Draft resisters turned in 400 draft cards to the federal attorney in San Francisco, in another peaceful protest. But as the week wore on, the crowds grew larger and the tactics more violent. By Friday, October 20, 10,000 young protesters were engaged in a massive street battle with Oakland police. There was no more sitting down waiting passively for arrest: the protesters charged police lines, built barricades in the streets, and in general tied up downtown Oakland in a chaotic scene that resembled a scene from the French Revolution. That same week, several hundred students at the University of Wisconsin sat in at a university building to block recruiting by the Dow Chem-
itical Company (Dow was reviled by antiwar protesters for producing napalm for the war in Vietnam). Local police easily routed the sit-inners from the building with nightsticks and mace, but they had more trouble outside controlling a crowd of several thousand onlookers, enraged at the sight of the bloodied heads of their fellow students. Eventually police used tear gas and dogs to break up the protest.46

The climax to the week's protests came in Washington on Saturday, October 21. Antiwar organizers had set up a two-part event: a "traditional" gathering for a rally and speeches at the Lincoln Memorial, followed, for the more adventurously inclined, by a march that crossed the Potomac River to the Pentagon building, headquarters to Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. Jerry Rubin, who had won his spurs as an antiwar organizer in Berkeley, coordinated the event. Rubin had a taste for the dramatic that was matched by his associate, Abbie Hoffman, a veteran organizer for the northern support group, Friends of SNCC. Both Rubin and Hoffman were deeply attracted to the youthful counterculture that was emerging in places like Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco and the East Village of New York, which was evident in the spirit of whimsical militance they brought to the antiwar movement. Hoffman's promise to "levitate" the Pentagon and then spin it in midair in a ritual exorcism to drive out its "evil spirits," irritated some of the more sober-minded leaders of the antiwar movement, but succeeded in attracting hundreds of colorfully garbed hippies to join the march. (They looked "like the legions of Sgt. Pepper's Band," novelist Norman Mailer would write in The Armies of the Night, his celebrated account of the day's events. In their multihued and multithemed costumes, the protesters seemed to Mailer to be "assembled from all the intersections between history and the comic books, between legend and television, the Biblical archetypes and the movies."47)

The Pentagon did not levitate, but 30,000 marchers did bring the antiwar message to within shouting distance of the building. Several thousand of the most militant broke through lines of federal marshals, soldiers, and National Guardsmen and reached the side of the building. A few carried Viet Cong flags; others put flowers in the gun barrels of the young soldiers who surrounded their encampment. There they sat and sang and yelled "Join us!" to the soldiers. As dusk arrived, the marshals moved in with clubs and tear gas, and nearly 700 were arrested.48

Robert McNamara watched the protest from the roof of the Pentagon. Ironically, the experience filled him with nostalgia for the early innocent days of Sixties protest. Privately disillusioned with the war he had done so much to create, he found himself plotting strategy for the antiwar movement: "I could not help but think that had the protesters been more disciplined—Gandhi-like—they could have achieved their objective of shutting us down." McNamara's son Craig, a prep school student at the time, was already so dis-
mayed by his father’s responsibility for American policies in Vietnam that he had pinned a Viet Cong flag on his bedroom wall; later, as a college student, he would take part in violent antiwar protests. “I remember the rage setting in on me, and the frustration that we all felt because we couldn’t stop the war,” he would tell an interviewer years later. “What was in my mind . . . was rage, pure rage.”49

As Norman Mailer walked toward the crowd before the Lincoln Memorial that October day, he heard the peal of a trumpet in distance, which seemed to him to “go all the way back through a galaxy of bugles to the cries of the Civil War, . . . The ghosts of old battles were wheeling like clouds over Washington.”50 The clouds continued to hover, the drums to beat on, the trumpets to sound. The war was truly coming home.
CHAPTER 10

The Fall of the Great Society

It’s a terrible thing for me to sit by and watch someone else starve my Great Society to death. . . . Soon she’ll be so ugly that the American people will refuse to look at her; they’ll stick her in a closet to hide her away and there she’ll die. And when she dies, I, too, will die.
—Former president Lyndon Johnson, 1971

In an issue of the Village Voice published late in 1966, cartoonist Jules Feiffer offered a wry analysis of the state of domestic politics in his weekly cartoon. “Big Daddy,” a young girl in western dress asks a stricken-looking, cowboy-garbed Lyndon Johnson in the cartoon’s first panel, “That look on your face—yer hidin’ somethin’.” “Sit down, child,” Johnson replies gravely. “Yew gonna have t’be brave. . . . Great Society has had an accident, child.” She begs reassurance that it’s only a “li’l bitty accident,” but Johnson tells her not to get her hopes up. Then, in the final panel, the child looks up at Johnson with suddenly dawning suspicion: “This accident o’ Great Society’s, Big Daddy. Has it already happened—or are yew about t’have it happen?” “Naow,” Johnson responds slyly, “We don’t want t’grow up too fast, child.”

By this time Village Voice readers, like many of Johnson’s former supporters, had come to regard the president as a habitual liar. The man who, seemingly, had no enemies at the start of 1965, had fallen below a 50 percent approval rating by the spring of 1966. The term “credibility gap” was by now in wide circulation to describe Johnson’s penchant for deceiving the public. Feiffer probably did Johnson an injustice in suggesting willing complicity on his part in the demise of the bright hopes of the early Great Society. In retirement, Johnson would speak with obvious anguish of the fate of his social programs, about the ill luck and difficult political choices that hampered them while he was in office, and about their cruel dismembering at the hands of his Republican successor. “[N]ow Nixon has come along and everything I’ve worked for is ruined,” he complained to interviewer Doris Kearns in 1971. “There’s a story in the paper every day about him slashing another one of my
Great Society programs. I can just see him waking up in the morning, making that victory sign of his and deciding which program to kill.44

LBJ's self-exculpating account of the death of the Great Society cannot, however, be taken as the whole truth. The bold vision of social transformation that he had announced with such enthusiasm during the presidential campaign of 1964 would wither long before Richard Nixon was in the position to wield an executioner's ax. In the course of 1966, with overwhelming Democratic majorities still in control of both houses of Congress, Johnson could persuade Congress to pass only a single significant Great Society proposal, the Model Cities Act providing federal funding for the redesign and reconstruction of America's inner cities. And even that measure passed with greatly reduced majorities compared to those enjoyed by previous Great Society legislation. Johnson's real goal in 1966 was to hold down spending on existing Great Society programs rather than passing new measures. As domestic policy adviser Joseph Califano would recall, "Johnson's extravagant rhetoric announcing new programs belied the modest funds he requested to begin them." The5 Political reversals in the 1966 midterm elections reinforced Johnson's caution.

Lyndon Johnson could read election returns as well as any man who had ever sat in the Oval Office. Although he continued to propose new social programs in the years remaining in his presidency, they were in scale and ambition nothing like those he had put forward in 1964–1965. There was no more talk of unconditional war against poverty; now it was simply a "poverty program." By 1968, when he delivered his final State of the Union address, Johnson used the term "Great Society" in only a single passing reference.6

Johnson bore significant, though not exclusive, responsibility for blighting the promise of liberal reform in the 1960s. His responsibility lay first and foremost in the fact that after 1965 his first priority as president no longer concerned the Great Society or domestic policy in general, but winning the war in Vietnam. The war not only diverted Johnson's attention from domestic policy, but also drained billions of dollars in federal funding, some portion of which might otherwise have gone to the Great Society. The war also undermined Johnson's authority, divided Democrats into feuding camps, and emboldened his conservative opponents. But even without the war, the Great Society would likely have come to grief in the later 1960s, as it ran afoul of other conflicts breaking out between Americans over issues such as racial justice, crime, personal morality, and economic security.

By January 1966, when President Johnson delivered his third State of the Union address, there was no question that the United States was deeply involved in a war that was not destined to end any time soon. The president vowed in his address that the country would prove "strong enough to pursue our goals in the rest of the world while still building a Great Society at home."7 But as the war in Vietnam escalated, so did its costs, in dollars as well as in lives. The $5 billion the United States spent in Vietnam in 1965
doubled the following year; by 1968 direct costs of running the war (excluding veterans benefits and related expenses) increased to $33 billion.

"Nothing I had read, no photographs I had seen prepared me for the immensity of the American effort," veteran correspondent Robert Sherrod reported from Vietnam in Life Magazine early in 1967. The "fantastic expense of the war," he argued, "can only be comprehended in the viewing."

There was the new "Pentagon West" building in Saigon, providing offices for the 68 American generals stationed in the city, constructed at a cost of $25 million. There were nine new jet landing fields constructed between Da Nang and Saigon, each of them a 10,000 foot-long strip of aluminum or concrete, costing at least $5 million. There were three new deep-water piers in Saigon to handle incoming cargo from U.S. merchant ships, and three more in Da Nang. The new harbor at Cam Ranh Bay would by itself cost American taxpayers $110 million. And all that was just infrastructure. There was also the daily cost of fighting a war in which the United States relied heavily on superior firepower. One evening, Sherrod reported:

I flew from the demilitarized zone down to Saigon, about three quarters of the length of this 900-mile string bean of a country. Much of the coast was lit up by flares, artillery shells twinkled in 40 or 50 different spots. No battle were being fought that night but the Viet Cong, if present, presumably were being kept awake and the interdicting fire prevented them from traveling certain routes in case they intended going that way. This lavish use of firepower, whether effective or not, contributes to the cost of killing the enemy, which is calculated at $400,000 per soldier—including 75 bombs and 150 artillery shells for each corpse.\(^9\)

President Johnson was reluctant to admit the actual costs of the war, not wanting to do anything that would make an already unpopular conflict even more so, or to hand enemies of his domestic policies a reason to demand fiscal austerity at home. Although short-term bookkeeping devices allowed Johnson to fudge the true costs for awhile, the bill would soon come due in the form of mounting government deficits as well as the beginnings of an inflationary spiral in the American economy. (Defense spending increases personal income but not the amount of consumer goods on which such income can be spent—a classic formula for inflation.) In the summer of 1967 Johnson finally bit the bullet and asked Congress for a 10 percent income tax surcharge to pay for the war.

Johnson was being hit from both the Right and the Left on the issue of spending in Vietnam. The Right demanded that Johnson cut domestic spending as the price for increased taxes (a dispute that delayed the actual passage of the income tax surcharge for nearly a year). "We are trying to get this message across," declared Wilbur Mills, the conservative chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, in which the surtax bill was bottled up. "We want a pause in this headlong rush toward ever bigger government."\(^{10}\) The Left, on the other hand—at least that portion of the Left that still thought it
shared any common political ground with Johnson—intended to hold the
president to his pledge to provide guns and butter to the American people.
Bobby Kennedy, now ensconced in Congress as a senator from New York
State, and still officially a supporter of the war, challenged Johnson in the
spring of 1966 when the administration proposed a lower than expected
funding request for aid to disadvantaged schools. The “200 million dollars that is
being cut [from the original request],” Kennedy declared, “is what it costs to
send the B-52s over Vietnam for perhaps a week.”

“I knew from the start,” Johnson told Doris Kearns:

that I was bound to be crucified either way I moved. If I left the woman I really
loved—the Great Society—in order to get involved with that bitch of a war on the
other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home . . . . But if I left that
war and let the Communists take over South Vietnam, then I would be seen as a
coward and my nation would be seen as an appeaser.”

Johnson’s only hope for salvaging his dream of being remembered in history as a great liberal reformer was to get “that bitch of a war” over with in
a hurry, and then return to be faithful to “the woman I really loved—the
Great Society.” And so, like a gambler on a losing streak throwing good money
after bad, he constantly upped the ante. As of December 31, 1965, there were
184,300 American troops stationed in Vietnam. Thus far, 636 had died in
combat. Two years later Johnson had raised the number of American troops
in South Vietnam to 485,600; 19,562 had died.

Johnson and his military commanders counted on search-and-destroy op-
erations to bring victory in Vietnam. Every day thousands of American troops
were out on patrol, humping the boonies, in search of the enemy. Often they
found no trace of the enemy except well-concealed and deadly booby traps.
Sometimes they got lucky and stumbled across an arms cache, or managed
to flush out a squad of Viet Cong or a regiment of North Vietnamese sol-
diers. Some of these operations went on for months, delivering large cumu-
lative numbers of dead enemies to be tallied into “body counts” and “kill ratios” by the Pentagon’s computers. Operation Masher, which ran from January
through March 1966 on the Bong Son Plain in central Vietnam, provided a
body count of 2389 enemy dead. Operation Junction City, a year later in War
Zone C, northwest of Saigon along the Cambodian border, produced a body
count of nearly 3000 enemy dead.

Some search-and-destroy operations were joint South Vietnamese-
American efforts, but increasingly, the Americans were taking the place of
their allies in combat. With the exceptions of some elite South Vietnamese
battalions of airborne troops and marines, ARVN earned a reputation for its
preference for engaging in what skeptical American observers dubbed “search-
and-evade” missions. Reviewing the statistical performance of the Eighteenth
ARVN Division, which claimed to have conducted over 5000 patrols in one week in 1966, during which they made a total of only thirteen contacts with the enemy, U.S. military adviser John Paul Vann wrote disgustedly, "I can easily establish more enemy contacts on a daily basis myself." The Saigon government, now jointly run by two former generals, Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky and chief of state Nguyen Van Thieu, did not inspire enthusiasm either in the civilian population or in the military. In 1965 alone, 113,000 South Vietnamese soldiers and militiamen deserted, a figure that nearly equaled the number of additional Americans sent that year to fight in Vietnam.

As the French had learned in the First Indochina War, Communist guerrilla fighters were hard to find—unless they wanted to be found. The Communists were often tipped off in advance of American plans, either through the elaborate systems of spies they maintained on and near U.S. bases, or by preliminary air and artillery strikes. A study by the U.S. Army showed that from 1966 to 1967 the overwhelming majority of all battles in South Vietnam were started not by American forces, but by the Communists, usually by ambushing American units in the countryside.
Meanwhile the air war over North Vietnam continued and expanded. This too proved a costly enterprise. The North Vietnamese defended their air space with a sophisticated system of antiaircraft defense provided to them by the Soviets, including radar, antiaircraft weapons, SAM [surface-to-air missile] batteries, and MiG-17 and MiG-21 fighters. From 1965 through 1968 the United States lost over 900 aircraft over North Vietnam, with over 800 pilots and crewmen killed, and over 500 captured.

The costs were heavy but the results meager. A government-sponsored study of the effects of Operation Rolling Thunder concluded soberly that as of July 1966 “the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam had had no measurable direct effect on Hanoi’s ability to mount and support military operations in the South at the current level.” North Vietnam’s agricultural economy could not be significantly damaged by air attack; its transportation system could be easily rebuilt after attacks; and because most of the weapons being funneled down the Ho Chi Minh Trail were imported by North Vietnam, it made little difference how many North Vietnamese factories were destroyed. Infiltration of men and supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail increased steadily during the years of the heaviest bombing. It was estimated that it took an average of a hundred tons of bombs dropped along the trail to kill a single North Vietnamese soldier.

When Defense Secretary Robert McNamara read this report in the fall of 1966, it furthered his growing personal disillusionment with the war. In a memorandum to President Johnson in May 1967, McNamara warned:

There may be a limit beyond which many Americans and much of the world will not permit the United States to go. The picture of the world’s greatest superpower killing or seriously injuring 1,000 non-combatants a week, while trying to pound a tiny backward nation into submission on an issue whose merits are hotly disputed, is not a pretty one.¹³

McNamara kept his doubts quiet, save to a few high-level officials. Others broke with Johnson to speak out publicly. Perhaps the most eloquent dissent from the war came from Martin Luther King, Jr., who in a speech in New York City in April 1967 issued what he called a “declaration of independence” from the war in Vietnam. As a dedicated pacifist, King was first and foremost opposed to the war because of his moral objections to the use of violence. But he also challenged Lyndon Johnson’s claim that Americans could enjoy both guns and butter. That issue had already been decided in favor of the former: “A few years there was a shining moment,” King declared, “but it seemed ‘as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor’.

Then came the build-up in Vietnam, and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war... So I was increasingly compelled to see the war an an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.¹⁶
The war that President Johnson had proposed fighting against poverty was intended as only one part of the much more ambitious project of building the Great Society. But in historical memory the former has all but subsumed the latter; few people today remember how much of the Great Society, from Medicare to highway beautification to endowments for the humanities and arts, was designed primarily to benefit the middle class. Similarly, the costs of the war on poverty have been greatly exaggerated. Even at their height, Johnson's poverty programs never represented the "unconditional war" that he declared in his first State of the Union address. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who as assistant secretary of labor in charge of the Office of Policy Planning and Research in 1964 had been present at the launching of the war on poverty, would later declare that it had been "oversold and underfinanced to the point that its failure was almost a matter of design." The Office of Economic Opportunity, the agency overseeing the poverty program, received only 1.5 percent of the federal budget for all its programs in the years from 1965 to 1970. Had the money spent on poverty programs simply been parcelled out in cash grants to every American whose income fell below the poverty line in those years, each poor person would have received a grand total of about $70 a year.

The war on poverty had scarcely gotten off the ground when it ran into sustained political opposition. Conservative Republicans viewed the whole thing as an expensive government boondoggle. Many Democrats, particularly those in city government, came to oppose its provisions for "maximum feasible participation" of the poor in directing poverty programs, particularly
through the community action agencies. Sargent Shriver had initially expected those agencies to function in ways similar to a board of education, formally independent of local government as school boards generally were, but certainly not in an adversarial position. Instead, many of the agencies launched voter registration drives to oust incumbent politicians or sponsored marches on city halls to demand improved services for poor neighborhoods.

The backlash from urban Democratic leaders was immediate and intense. Two Democratic mayors, Sam Yorty of Los Angeles and John Shelley of San Francisco, offered a resolution to the 1965 meeting of the U.S. Conference of Mayors condemning the war on poverty for “fostering class struggle” in American cities. (Yorty had been a long-time conservative gadfly within the Democratic Party. Shelley, on the other hand, was a former trade unionist who had headed up the San Francisco Labor Council before becoming mayor—his disaffection had ominous implications for the future of urban Democratic politics.) When Congress passed the Model Cities Act in 1966, it directed that the program be administered by the Department of Housing and Urban Development rather than the now-suspect OEO, and the provisions for “maximum feasible participation” of the poor were eliminated. Unlike the programs established in 1964–1965, Model Cities would be a program controlled by big city mayors, not by people in poor neighborhoods and ghettos.

By 1966 even the poor were complaining about the war on poverty, a war that had been launched on their behalf, but not at their behest. One of the defining characteristics of the “culture of poverty” that Michael Harrington had described in *The Other America* was a sense of fatalism, at odds with any kind of sustained political involvement. But the war on poverty created a sense of rising expectations among the poor that the antipoverty programs could do little to assuage. In April 1966, at a Washington, D.C. conference of the Citizen’s Crusade Against Poverty (a private advocacy group set up at the behest of the United Auto Workers union to lobby on behalf of the poverty program), Sargent Shriver was booed and jeered by a dissident group of community activists when he attempted to address the group. Shriver was driven from the stage by chants of “You’re lying!” and “Stop listening to him!” Afterward UAW official Jack Conway despairingly that the poor “have turned on the people who wanted to help them.”

For all its limited scope, and for all the controversy it created, the war on poverty was not without its successes. The number of people in the United States whose annual income fell beneath the poverty line declined from 32 million (or 17 percent of the population) in 1965 to 23 million (or 11 percent of the population in 1973). To be sure, poverty had been declining in the 1950s even before there was a war on poverty, and the general prosperity and low unemployment rates of the mid-to-late 1960s certainly accounted for some of the decline. But save for the period of the Second World War, which brought the Great Depression to a sudden end, there was no other pe-
period in American history when poverty rates declined as rapidly as they did during the years of Johnson's presidency and its immediate aftermath.\textsuperscript{22}

Nonetheless, by the later 1960s, Americans who disagreed on just about everything else were united in judging the war on poverty an abject failure. Government programs had clearly failed to eliminate poverty as either an economic category or as a "culture." If anything, the remaining urban poor (whose numbers began to increase again during the economic hard times of the later 1970s) seemed even more permanently mired in their condition than they had been before the federal government interested itself in their plight.

The conservative argument that the very programs liberals had foisted upon the country in the 1960s kept the poor bound to a "cycle of dependency" would become conventional wisdom within a very few years. While the number of poor people declined in the later 1960s, the number of AFDC recipients mounted at an even more precipitous rate. In 1960 fewer than three-quarters of a million families were receiving aid through AFDC at a cost to the federal and state governments of under a billion dollars; by 1972 there were 3 million families receiving AFDC, at an annual cost of $6 billion.\textsuperscript{23} The swelling welfare rolls were accompanied by rising rates of illegitimacy, teenage pregnancies, single-parent families, violent crime, substance abuse, and a host of other ills that came to be laid at the feet of the liberal social engineers of the Great Society.\textsuperscript{24}

In a curious way, the problem with the war on poverty was not that it failed, but that it succeeded—perhaps too well for its own political survival. The intent of the war, after all, was to lessen the distance between the "other America" and the mainstream. One of the characteristic elements of American national identity is the belief that citizenship, and personal security and dignity, are grounded in "rights." The war on poverty, through its rhetoric, and through the legal services it provided poor communities, reinforced the idea that the poor as well as the affluent should enjoy these rights. And one of the expressions of this new sensibility was the belief that those who received government aid in the form of welfare payments did so not as a matter of charity, but of right.

Since the start of the twentieth century, the term "welfare" had changed in American political discourse from a term with positive associations of health and well-being to one implying malingering incapacity and the waste of taxpayers' hard-earned money. At best, welfare tended to be viewed as a kind of gift that the better-off, through the government, offered to the less fortunate and deserving poor. Those who received it were expected to be appropriately grateful and as unobtrusive as possible.\textsuperscript{25}

At the start of the 1960s only about a third of the families eligible to participate in the AFDC program were actually receiving benefits. AFDC was a program funded jointly by the federal government and the states, and administered at the state level. Many state legislatures did their best to dis-
courage new applicants. Benefit levels were usually set below the states’ own
official guidelines for the minimum income necessary to support a family at
a decent standard of living, and strict residency requirements prevented newcomers from claiming even these meager benefits. The welfare system was
set up so that normal presumptions about prying into personal affairs did not
apply to recipients. Since welfare was a “means-tested” program, every scrap of household income had to be reported to social workers: concealed earnings from a child’s paper route could result in charges of “welfare fraud.” Evidence of a “man in the house” would also result in AFDC recipients (most of them single women) being dumped from the program; social workers sometimes staged midnight raids on the homes of recipients to make sure that they remained as single as they claimed to have been when applying for benefits. All of this worked to reinforce the stigmatizing image of welfare and discouraged would-be recipients from even applying.36

In the course of the 1960s an alliance of poor people, middle-class advocates, and lawyers specializing in the new field of poverty law argued that welfare was not a gift, and certainly not stigmatizing, but rather a legally guaranteed entitlement. Local groups of welfare mothers began to coalesce in the mid-1960s, some of them brought together by Community Action Programs, others by independent community organizers.27

In 1966 George Wiley, a former chemistry professor and associate national director of CORE, helped pull together local welfare rights groups from across the country into a national organization, which took the name of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) the following year. Although its membership peaked at little over 20,000 members at the end of the decade, NWRO became a highly visible and, for a time, effective organization. While lawyers argued the case for welfare rights in the courts, welfare recipients took their demands into the public assistance offices, with marches and sit-ins. William Ryan, a white liberal psychologist, described such tactics as “the plain old-fashioned American practice of demanding and getting one’s rights.”28 In a statement outlining its goals, NWRO declared in 1966:

As members of a National Welfare Rights Movement . . . we are are not willing to exchange our rights as American citizens
—our rights to dignity
—our rights to justice
—our rights to democratic participation
in order to obtain the physical necessities for our families. . . . 29

NWRO tactics led to many tangible benefits, both for its own members and for millions of other people on welfare. The level of AFDC benefits increased, and restrictions on eligibility were lessened. By the end of the 1960s nearly 90 percent of those eligible for AFDC benefits were receiving them.30
But practical success did not guarantee political success. The NWRO suffered the inevitable problems of organizations based on low-income members—high turnover and uncertain finances—and fell apart by the mid-1970s. More importantly, the goal of "welfare rights" never acquired the patina of legitimacy that came to be associated with the idea of equal rights for blacks and women. The more that welfare recipients exercised the "old-fashioned American practice" of a vocal assertion of rights, the less they seemed entitled to the status of the "deserving poor." When NWRO members conducted a sit-in during a Senate hearing on punitive welfare regulations, Russell Long of Louisiana declared, "If they can find the time to march in the streets, picket, and sit all day in committee hearing rooms, they can find the time to do some useful work."\(^{31}\)

The hostility to welfare recipients was part of larger shift of sentiment against the poor in the later 1960s. The piety with which poverty had been spoken of in the early days of the Johnson administration gave way by the mid-1960s to a more astringent rhetoric. The vision of the poor as latter-day Daniel Boones perched up high on some West Virginia mountainside disappeared from the media and popular consciousness, to be replaced by the more durable and menacing image of a black urban underclass.\(^{32}\)

In 1965 Daniel Patrick Moynihan unintentionally dealt the earlier idealized vision of the poor a fatal blow. Moynihan had come to Washington in

Warding off looters during the riot in Newark, July 1967. Source: Express Newspapers/F373/Archive Photos
1961 with both political and academic credentials; he had been an assistant to New York governor Averell Harriman in the late 1950s, during which time he also managed to complete a Ph.D. in political science. He was committed to two goals during his years with the Labor Department, bringing the insights of contemporary social science to bear in the design of public policy, and making a name for himself. He succeeded in both endeavors when he oversaw the writing of a memorandum entitled The Negro Family: The Case for National Action, which became better known as the Moynihan Report.33

Moynihan described what he called a “tangle of pathology” that had undermined the urban black family in recent years. Moynihan’s intention in analyzing black family structure was fully in conformity with the reform goals of the war on poverty, and drew heavily on studies of ghetto life by black social scientists like E. Franklin Frazier and Kenneth Clark. There were also echoes of Gunnar Myrdal’s An American Dilemma, including the phrase about “pathology.” The instability of many black families, as measured in rates of divorce or abandonment, illegitimacy, female-headed families, and welfare dependency, was as Moynihan described it, a historical legacy of slavery, reinforced by the continuing high rates of black male unemployment, and the fact that AFDC payments were available only to households without an adult male in residence. (Moynihan noted that this description did not apply to all black families, and that a large and increasingly successful black middle class was also emerging in American society.)

The solution for those who were trapped in the social tangle of ghetto ills, Moynihan thought, would be more jobs for black men, who would then be able to take their rightful place in society and in their families as breadwinners. However, Moynihan chose not to include that recommendation in the final version of the paper, a fateful omission.

The Moynihan Report was released in March, initially restricted in circulation to a small circle of top policymakers. Lyndon Johnson was among its readers, and its impact was seen in an address he gave at Howard University in June of 1965. It was, in one sense, the most radical speech of his presidency. Johnson declared that it was not enough for Americans to commit themselves to seeking “equality as a right and a theory” for black Americans; they should press on to achieve “equality as a fact.” He went on to argue that black poverty differed in important ways from that experienced by whites: there were, he averred, “differences—deep, corrosive, obstinate differences—radiating painful roots into the community, and into the family, and the nature of the individual.”34 The previous year, when he sought passage of the war on poverty, Johnson deliberately downplayed black poverty, visiting Kentucky rather than Harlem to draw attention to the plight of the poor. Now, with a different purpose in mind, he was arguing that black poverty was even more devastating than that suffered by whites. The policy implications of that observation were not as clear as Johnson assumed.
The Moynihan Report was leaked to the press that summer (some suspected that Moynihan, not exactly averse to publicity, was the responsible party). The fact that the report's existence became known almost simultaneously with the outbreak of the Watts riot ensured that its conclusion would receive considerable attention—though not of the kind that liberals would welcome. Although there was nothing startling new or particularly original in Moynihan's observations about the black family, the word "pathology" leapt off the page of his report, infuriating black readers, who took it as an insult, and persuading many white readers that the problems of the black community were so intractable as to be impervious to government social welfare programs (the fact that Moynihan himself would later drift toward this position, at least temporarily, reinforced the belief that he had always intended the report as an attack on the war on poverty). In any event, after the summer of 1965 the behavior of the poor—and most particularly of the black poor—rather than any privations or injustices they endured, came to the fore in the minds of many Americans when they thought about the issue of poverty.

The war on poverty was founded on the assumption that the United States had entered upon an era of permanent abundance. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 declared its goal to be the elimination of the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty. But even in the go-go years of the 1960s economy "plenty" was unevenly distributed in the United States, in ways that left a majority of American families vulnerable to any downturn. Workers' real wages and median family income increased dramatically in the postwar era, but income share remained virtually unchanged (the top fifth of the population received 43 percent of income in 1947, 41.2 percent in 1968). The median family income for 1968, which stood at $8632, was still about a thousand dollars less than what the Bureau of Labor Statistics defined as "modest but adequate" income for an urban family of four. That meant that many working-class families had to scramble to stay ahead, either by going into debt or by fielding additional breadwinners, usually by means of sending wives into the workforce. (In 1960, 37.8 percent of women were in labor force; by 1970 that number had increased to 43.4 percent—a rising and irreversible trend that would jump to over 50 percent before the end of the next decade.) Rising wages also began to erode as inflation picked up later in the decade and as taxpayers found themselves bumped upward into higher tax brackets.

White working-class taxpayers and small property owners, already fearful about blacks moving into their neighborhoods, resented the war on poverty as a payoff to rioters, "welfare queens," and "poverty pimps." In a nation long obsessed with the automobile, it was only fitting that the earliest and pithiest statements of new political trends were to be found attached to rear fenders: when "I Fight Poverty, I Work" bumper stickers began appearing in the mid-1960s, it was clear that the nation's brief honeymoon of concern and goodwill with the poor was coming to an end.
The prospects for liberal reform were worsened by declining white support for the civil rights struggle. In 1964, 68 percent of northern whites supported the Johnson's administration's civil rights initiatives. That was before Watts and the riots that followed. Throughout the country, there were 11 major riots (defined as civil disturbances lasting two days or more) in the summer of 1966, and 32 minor riots; the following summer, the number jumped to 25 major and 30 minor riots, including the bloodiest outburst of the decade in Detroit, where 43 people died in the rioting in July 1967.37

By 1966, 52 percent of northern whites believed the government was pushing too fast for integration.38 As long as "civil rights" had been seen as a regional problem, a battle fought between white and black citizens of distant states like Alabama and Mississippi, white ethnic voters in northern cities were prone to support or at least tolerate the liberal politicians who voted for legislation banning racial discrimination. But when confrontations broke out in northern cities between whites and blacks over issues of immediate local concern—housing, jobs, schools, political clout—and when nonviolent demonstrations gave way to or were accompanied by black rioting the equation changed.

When Martin Luther King, Jr. had somberly surveyed the ruins of Watts in August 1965, he remarked to Bayard Rustin, who accompanied him on the trip, "I worked to get these people the right to eat hamburgers, and now I've got to do something... to help them get the money to buy it." Accordingly, in 1966, King led the SCLC into its first northern urban campaign, on behalf of the 700,000 black residents of Chicago. Building on years of patient organizing by an interracial coalition, King and lieutenants like Jesse Jackson aimed to expose and eradicate the de facto segregation of jobs, schools, and neighborhoods in the North. The SCLC decided to open its ambitious effort with a push for open housing, hoping to bring to bear the same combination of moral and political pressure that had succeeded in opening to black citizens the voting booths and the public schools of the South. SCLC imported rhetoric, songs, and tactics from the South to the North. One movement activist charged, in language intended to invoke the image of George Wallace in the school doorway, that Chicago realtors were "standing in the doorway of thousands of homes being offered for sale or rent."40 SCLC organizers marshaled their followers to march into all-white neighborhoods, just as they had previously marched on segregated businesses and courthouses.

The reaction was not what King or his aides had intended. Instead of shaming the North, they succeeded instead in convincing many northern whites that southern whites may have had a point in their resistance to civil rights. In neighborhoods like Gage Park and Marquette Park on the southern edge of Chicago, thousands of white residents turned out to jeer and throw rocks at the SCLC marchers. Young males took the lead; one group of
boys brandished a noose and sang to the tune of a popular commercial jingle, “I'd love to be an Alabama trooper/That is what I'd really like to be/For if I were an Alabama trooper/Then I could hang a nigger legally.”

Martin Luther King was among those struck by a flying brick; only a massive police presence allowed the demonstrators to escape serious injury.

Newspaper editorials condemned the violence of word and deed, yet civil rights groups and liberal lawmakers were unable to push an open-housing bill through Congress. More support was expressed for the “overworked and overcriticized” Chicago police than for the marchers; pollsters and journalists found that white Americans tended to blame SCLC for provoking white rage. A man from Maryland wrote to King, “The results [of the marches] were predictable...hatred has been built up which it will take a generation to overcome.”

By the mid-1960s, the rhetoric and imagery of the civil rights movement was being appropriated by whites for their own purposes. As one Michigan woman wrote to her congressman, “These white people [in Chicago] wish to be left alone and should be allowed to live with their own kind of people, or is the white not supposed to have any freedom?”

Open housing proved to be an issue very different from the question of whether blacks should vote or be able to eat in any restaurant they could afford to patronize. Residents of places like Marquette Park had saved for years to buy their own homes in a secure, comfortable neighborhood. For them, black migration spelled a sharp increase in crime and social tensions; the value of their property and the quality of their children’s educations, they feared, would decline rapidly.

The conflict in Chicago in the summer of 1966, and similar ones in other northern locales, revealed large numbers of whites now ready to stand up in the name of their own rights and grievances, in ways that did not bode well for the civil rights movement or for any other part of the liberal reform agenda. Liberal politicians were held accountable for rising racial animosity, and a host of related evils. A resident of Marquette Park complained to Senator Paul Douglas, a longtime champion of such liberal causes as antipoverty programs and civil rights: “We work hard, pay our taxes, improve ourselves, only to find the more we improve ourselves and our property the more we are taxed and told what we can and cannot do with it.”

Property, taxes, self-improvement, and self-rule—this was economic and cultural terrain perfectly suited for nurturing a new conservative political coalition. Senator Douglas would find that out in a hurry as he went down to defeat in November 1966 in his bid for reelection to what would have been his fourth term in office.

As Americans were becoming more mistrustful of liberal leaders, many also wished that traditional sources of authority could be restored to the role they had played (or were imagined to have played) in earlier days, as enforcers of a common morality and social harmony. “We are becoming can-
nibalized," a working-class Italian American from Brooklyn complained. "We
didn't sass the policeman when he told us to move. Now in school they call
teachers 'motherfucker.'" 45

Cultural backlash intersected with the racial backlash and also with class
resentments. Although many of the youthful denizens of places like
Haight-Ashbury were in reality runaways or "throwaways" from poor and
working-class families, the image of the counterculture became synonymous
in the minds of many Americans with the privileged existence enjoyed by
well-off students at the nation's best-known colleges and universities. The
long-haired hippie/student aroused a curious mixture of antagonism and
envy. "When I hear a college kid say, 'I'm oppressed,' I don't believe him,"
37-year-old white steel worker from Cicero, Illinois, told radio interviewer
Studs Terkel:

You know what I'd like to do for one year? Living like a college kid. Just for one
year, I'd love to. Wow! (Whispers) Wow! Sports car! Marijuana! (laughs) Wild,
sexy broads, I'd love that, hell yes, I would. 46

But his counterpart in Brooklyn, quoted earlier, regarded the same behavior
as uncivilized and impermissible: "This sexual permissiveness is disgraceful,
it's like dogs in the street. The way of living today, there are no values." 47 It
was bad enough that the privileged young ignored traditional authority and
morality; worse, they actually celebrated the resulting chaos: "We are out-
laws!," the Berkeley Barb, a leading underground newspaper exulted. "We
defy law and order with our bricks bottles garbage long hair filth obscenity
drugs games guns bikes fire fun & fucking—the future of our struggle is the
future of crime in the streets." 48

There was a certain amount of deliberately provocative hyperbole in such
editorial broadsides, and in rock anthems like Jefferson Airplane's "Volunteers"
("We are all outlaws in the eyes of Amerika!"). But for urban Americans, both
black and white, crime was no joking matter in the 1960s. After having
decayed steadily since the Second World War, rates of serious crime, including
murder, rape, robbery, and auto theft shot up dramatically in the mid-1960s. 49

There were many explanations put forward for this disastrous trend. Liberals
favored explanations emphasizing environmental "root causes"—unemployment, poor schools, and the like. Conservatives, on the other hand,
blamed permissive child-rearing practices, lax law enforcement, and crimi-
nal-coddling courts. Criminologists pointed to additional factors that were
beyond the control of public policy, either liberal or conservative. Young
people in their teens and early twenties are always the group most likely to find
themselves in trouble with the law. The fact that the growth in crime in the
1960s began when the first wave of baby boomers turned 16 certainly ac-
counted for some, if not all, of the increase. 50
Calls to “support your local police” (a popular bumper sticker slogan), often came with a poorly disguised racial subtext. William Parker, the outspoken chief of the Los Angeles Police Department, told a local reporter in 1965 that within five years “45 percent of the metropolitan area of Los Angeles will be Negro. If you want any protection for your home and family, you’re going to have to get in and support a strong police department. If you don’t do that, come 1970, God help you.”

Conservative politicians quickly recognized the political importance of the crime statistics. “[W]e have heard of and seen many wars in the time of the present administration,” Barry Goldwater declared in a campaign speech in mid-September 1964 in St. Petersburg, Florida. “But have we yet heard of the only needed war—the war against crime?” Johnson responded a month later in a campaign speech in Dayton, Ohio, avowing that his war on poverty “is a war against crime and a war against disorder.” The following March, in a message to Congress, Johnson declared a “war on crime,” while still maintaining that the long-run solution to crime was jobs, education, and hope.

But the liberal emphasis on combating the “root causes” of crime, instead of just locking up criminals, was easily parodied by conservatives. “How long are we going to abdicate law and order . . . ” House minority leader Gerald Ford asked rhetorically in 1966, “in favor of a soft social theory that the man who heaves a brick through your window or tosses a firebomb into your car is simply the misunderstood and underprivileged product of a broken home?”

For millions of white Americans of middling income, “law and order” became both a cry of outrage at the political, cultural, and social upheavals of the 1960s, and the crux of the solution to them. The phrase conveyed the sense that the hard-won upward mobility of the postwar era was a fragile achievement, prey to the taunts of Ivy League radicals and ghetto rioters alike. The demand for “law and order” asserted the common grievances of ordinary people against the perversely misplaced sympathies of liberal politicians and intellectuals, a group who had come to seem contemptuous of the way normal Americans lived their lives.

In the course of the 1960s, the imagery of class conflict in America was turned on its head. Liberals—who had been thought of as defenders of the interests of the working classes in the 1930s, and who in the early 1960s embraced the cause of the most downtrodden of Americans, southern blacks and the poor—by the mid-1960s were viewed by many as an arrogant elite of “limousine liberals.” And conservatives—those “economic royalists” denounced by FDR in the 1930s as the aristocratic defenders of privilege and power—were emerging in the 1960s as the new populists, speaking for the common man and woman. A liberal government that seemed more interested in protecting esoteric and expansive notions of “rights” for marginal groups
than in protecting the lives and property of the vast majority was rapidly losing legitimacy. With the nation's financial resources engaged in the war in Vietnam, and its emotional resources engaged in the war on crime, there was precious little of either left over for a war on poverty. And if, as it seemed by 1966–1967, that the real political choice the United States faced was between constructing a Great Society or maintaining an orderly one, it is not surprising that so many would choose the latter over the former.
CHAPTER 11

The Conservative Revival

"You walk around with your Goldwater button, and you feel the thrill of treason."
—Robert Claus, student activist at the University of Wisconsin, 1961

“I find that America is fundamentally a conservative nation,” wrote Senator Barry Goldwater, Republican from Arizona, in a short, provocative book, published in 1960, that set forth his political creed. “The preponderant judgment of the American people, especially of the young people, is that the radical, or Liberal, approach has not worked and is not working. They yearn for a return to Conservative principles.”

At the time, most commentators found Goldwater’s judgment in The Conscience of a Conservative to be both inaccurate and old-fashioned. Didn’t most Americans endorse the central tenets and programs of modern liberalism? Didn’t they welcome government’s role in financing education, public housing, and insurance for the elderly and the unemployed? Hadn’t strong unions made working-class Americans prosperous? Wasn’t the liberal ethic of racial integration and cultural tolerance growing in popularity? Wasn’t it sensible to coexist peacefully with the Soviet Union, a nation whose hydrogen bombs could destroy every major U.S. city? A popular study of American conservatism, published in 1962, was subtitled The Thankless Persuasion. In the Senate, Goldwater had sponsored no major piece of legislation. “His main business there,” commented historian Richard Hofstadter at the time, “was simply to vote No.” Did the Right have anything meaningful to say to Americans in the 1960s?

Goldwater curtly dismissed that line of argument: “Conservatism, we are told, is out-of-date. The charge is preposterous. . . . The laws of God, and of nature have no dateline.” Then the former World War II pilot went on the attack: against the welfare state (“My aim is not to pass laws, but to repeal them”); against forced integration, even though he personally favored multiracial schools (“I am not prepared . . . to impose that judgment of mine . . .
on the people of Mississippi and South Carolina’); and against a foreign policy geared to “containing” the Soviet bloc instead of defeating “the Communist empire.”

In 1964 an unprecedented grassroots effort won Barry Goldwater the Republican nomination for president. By then, Conscience of a Conservative had sold over 3 million copies.

During the 1960s and after, much attention was paid to the powerful liberals who molded social policy and to the flamboyant movements—black, antiwar, feminist, countercultural—that challenged liberal ideas and actions from the Left. But the dominance of liberalism was attacked just as loudly and strongly from the Right. A growing social movement of conservatives—active on campuses, in business circles, inside Protestant and Catholic churches, and among Republican party activists—tried to reverse much of what the New Deal and subsequent administrations in Washington had wrought. Although conservatives did not capture the highest offices in the land until 1980—when Ronald Reagan was elected president and Republicans won control of the U.S. Senate—they had become a major political and cultural force more than a decade before.

Blessed with hindsight, we can better appreciate the significance of the ’60s Right. Conservatives began building a mass movement earlier than did the New Left. And they sustained morale and kept expanding their numbers for years after young radicals had splintered in various directions. The Left blazed through the ’60s like a meteor, reshaping the cultural landscape, particularly in the areas of gender and race. The Right established itself as a unified and potent political movement during the same decade. And, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, its fire is not yet extinguished.

Sixties conservatism had deep roots in the American past. Goldwater’s call to preserve social and moral order and to practice self-reliance echoed the sentiments of many a Puritan minister, slave-holding planter, and self-made industrialist. Like such forerunners, modern conservatives mixed their idealism with a loathing of anyone deemed to be ruining what they held dear. The men and women of the 1960s Right were strongly motivated by a vision of the good society, as elaborated by conservative thinkers as well as the Scriptures. But their appeals to meaner sentiments, particularly white racism, helped the movement grow among groups the Right had never attracted before.

The intellectual revival began at the end of World War II. In 1945 the future seemed to belong to the Left. Liberal Democrats governed in Washington and in most of the big states, and the membership and economic clout of unions was expanding. The federal bureaucracy had flourished during the war and might soon take on the tasks of economic planning and providing health care to all citizens—much as the new Labor government in Great Britain was doing. Conservatives quarreled among themselves about issues like the size
of the postwar military and feared for their future. No wonder essayist Albert Jay Nock, near the war’s end, dubbed “the Remnant” those like himself who continued to keep the traditional mode of conservatism alive.

At that melancholy moment, a new generation of thinkers was crafting works that gave the Right a storehouse of concepts which activists would refine and draw upon during the ensuing decades. Some of these writers were libertarian philosophers and economists, like Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, who argued that liberty in the marketplace was the key to a free society. Others were apostates from Marxism, fierce anticommunists like James Burnham and Will Herberg, who warned that the West must cling to its religious and moral values if it hoped to prevail against Soviet power and pro-Soviet subversion. Others, like the historian Russell Kirk and the sociologist Robert Nisbet, drew inspiration from traditional concepts like natural law and denied that a “meddling state” could or should dissolve natural differences between human beings. All these intellectuals were cosmopolitan in background and eager to debate the ideas of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud with their present-day admirers.5

At the core of the new conservatives’ worldview lay two profound, if somewhat antithetical, concepts. The first, derived from the eighteenth-century British writer Adam Smith, was that human freedom required government to stay out of economic life. This stemmed as much from moral conviction as from a calculation of how to produce goods and services most efficiently. As Hayek wrote in The Road to Serfdom:

Economic control is not merely control of a sector of human life which can be separated from the rest. It is the control of the means of all our ends. And whoever has sole control of the means must also determine which ends are to be served, which values are to be rated higher and which lower—in short, what men should believe and strive for.6

For Hayek, an Austrian émigré, liberal planners differed only in degree from their Nazi or Stalinist counterparts. All sought to coerce individuals to behave in ways the planners deemed most useful to society as a whole. All were “collectivists” who wanted to substitute a strong state for the spontaneous energies of citizens. As Milton Friedman, a disciple of Hayek’s who would later win the Nobel Prize in economics, argued in 1962, “The great advances of civilization, whether in architecture or painting, in science or literature, in industry or agriculture, have never come from centralized government.”7 Friedman advocated the end of any state agency or program—including the post office, the minimum wage, public housing, and national parks—that impeded or substituted for the marketplace.

The second big idea on the Right, inspired particularly by Adam Smith’s contemporary Edmund Burke, was the superiority of stable structures of au-
authority governed by a strict moral code. "Political problems," wrote Russell Kirk in 1953, "at bottom, are religious and moral problems. Custom, convention, and old prescription are checks both upon man's anarchic impulse and upon the innovator's lust for power." Liberalism, according to this view, was both foolish and dangerous: the impulse to perfect the world through the state would surely fail. But the effort to do so was tearing apart the traditional culture—rooted in the Bible—that had nurtured thriving families and local institutions from schools to churches to businesses. Will Herberg charged, "Modern man... has disencumbered himself of his historic faith, Jewish or Christian, ... [but] has opened himself up to the incursion of a host of devils... the most deceptive of pseudo-religions (Communism, Nazis, the Liberal cult of Progress)." Herberg was a Jew, but the most prominent traditionalists tended to have been raised as Catholics or, like Kirk, converted to that faith.

In the abstract, the viewpoint of a fierce economic libertarian was not congenial with that of a cultural conservative. Success in the marketplace required constant innovation: the ethic of newer and better clashed with the desire to preserve traditional values of thrift and sobriety. For Milton Friedman, any restriction on individual rights was suspect, whereas thinkers like Kirk and Herberg worried that only communal pressure to act responsibly kept America from descending into chaos.

However, there were pressing reasons for conservative intellectuals to join forces in the late '40s and the '50s. Above all, they shared a hatred of Soviet communism and its mammoth new ally, the People's Republic of China—which they regarded as a puppet state of the Kremlin. Libertarians indicted the "Reds" for practicing collectivism at its most evil and for relentlessly spreading their false gospel to other lands. "Stalinism is worse than fascism," wrote the former leftist Max Eastman, "more ruthless, barbarous, unjust, immoral, anti-democratic, unredeemed by any hope or scruple." Traditionalists were equally repulsed by a revolutionary order that persecuted the pious and declared its hostility to social classes and property rights. For Communists, nothing was sacred, save their own rigid dogma.

At home, the liberal "establishment" provided another incentive to intellectual fusion on the Right. New Deal reformers and left-leaning academics both promoted what conservatives called "creeping socialism." State regulatory agencies, strong labor unions, progressive income taxes, and civil rights laws all wrested control from employers, property owners, and local authorities. They implicitly punished anyone who had achieved worldly success and forced a redistribution of income. "Separate property from private possession," wrote Russell Kirk, "and Leviathan [the powerful state] becomes master of all. Economic leveling... is not economic progress." Conservatives of both persuasions were also unhappy with what they believed was an erosion of the spiritual values that, in their view, undergirded
the republic and motivated the battle against "Godless communism." Although about half of Americans regularly attended a house of worship, religious instruction was waning in the schools. And mainstream Protestant denominations affiliated with the National Council of Churches seemed more concerned with teaching cultural tolerance than in saving souls for Christ.

In 1962 the Supreme Court turned conservative discontent into outrage when it decided, in the case of Engel v. Vitale, that no state could require schoolchildren to pray. The specific prayer in question, written by the New York Regents (the state board of education), was rather prosaic. It read, "Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers and our country." But Jewish groups and the American Civil Liberties Union argued that the prayer violated the First Amendment's ban against establishing a religion, and a majority of justices agreed. One year later, the high court (in the Schempp and Murray cases) also ruled against mandatory Bible readings and recitations of the Lord's Prayer.

"The ruling could put the United States schools on the same basis as Russian schools," charged a Democratic congressman about Engel v. Vitale. His comment was among the more moderate ones uttered by critics of the Court. Billy Graham, the nation's most popular preacher, called the rulings part of a "diabolical scheme" that was "taking God and moral teaching from the schools" and ushering in a "deluge of juvenile delinquency." George Wallace, always eager to defy a federal mandate, vowed, "I don't care what they say in Washington, we are going to keep right on praying and reading the Bible in the public schools of Alabama." Veterans' groups called for a constitutional amendment to reverse the Court, and congressmen from both parties scheduled hearings into the matter. For intellectuals on the Right, the judicial decisions confirmed a belief that liberals were bereft of moral principle; conservatives were heartened to learn that, on this issue at least, most Americans concurred.

Thus, despite lingering differences over their ultimate ends, libertarians and traditionalists were drawn together by their antipathies. Both wrote for the same magazines—The Freeman, Human Events, and National Review—and promoted the political fortunes of such men as retired army general Douglas MacArthur and Barry Goldwater. Gradually, their ideas became well known among journalists and other literate Americans.

The most influential meeting point for conservative intellectuals and budding activists alike was National Review, which began publishing in the fall of 1953. Founder and editor William F. Buckley, Jr., though only 30 at the time, was already a famous and controversial writer. His books wittily condemned the secular, liberal cast of teaching at Yale, his alma mater, and defended the anticomunist purposes of Senator Joseph McCarthy, if not every charge the reckless inquisitor had flung. Buckley intended National Review
to be the beguiling standard-bearer for a new, fusionist Right. He and his fellow editors (including Brent Bozell, ghostwriter of Conscience of a Conservative) stood for an aggressive anticommunism and the unswerving defense of both the free market and traditional Christian virtues. But Buckley preferred writers who, like himself, hit their mark with an ironic foil instead of a polemical broadsword. His jaunty style demonstrated confidence in his opinions as well as the depth of his learning.

One 1962 column by Russell Kirk bemoaned the intellectual content of high school textbooks. Kirk ridiculed Wisconsin officials for censoring the old-style McGuffey Readers being used in one of the state’s elementary schools. “You really can’t allow ethical principles to take root in young heads, you know,” mimicked Kirk. “The authorities discovered that the Readers actually contained quotations from the Sermon on the Mount. . . . Somewhat intimidated, the school board agreed to snip out or cover with strips of brown paper the offending quotations from that old discriminationist, Jesus Christ.”

National Review never let readers forget that it was a journal of combat against the Left. Buckley and his colleagues considered the black freedom movement as sure a foe as any liberal president or secular academic. In this stance, the editors of National Review revealed both the depth and callousness of their principles. Through the late ’50s and early ’60s, the magazine consistently sided with the white South. At first, while echoing the argument for “state’s rights,” National Review did not flinch from publishing racist views. Were white southerners justified in resisting civil rights laws and demonstrators? “The shocking answer is Yes,” the editors wrote in 1957, “the white community is so entitled, because, for the time being, it is the advanced race.”

A few years later, when Bull Connor became the poster boy for white supremacy, National Review backed away from such pronouncements. But, like George Wallace, the magazine continued to thunder against the federal courts for trampling over “the principle of home rule” and depicted liberal politicians cravenly giving in to “rioting mobs, intemperate demagogues and rampant ideology.” “We are . . . depriving private citizens of the protection of their property; of enjoining, under threat of federal armed power, the police power from preserving order in our communities,” warned Frank Meyer in the late spring of 1963. Armed with the fusion of old ideals and even older prejudices, conservatives emerged from their intellectual subculture to build a movement.

They were not creating something entirely new. Anticommunists had been active on the Right for years and, during the early years of the Cold War, had mounted a furious campaign against movie stars and State Department officials whom they judged to be pro-Soviet “subversives.” In 1954 the political humiliation of Joseph McCarthy, prime symbol of the crusade, made
Americans wary of the more lurid charges. But the imperative to fight communism remained the primary spur for many conservative activists.

Some groups determined to carry on McCarthy’s work. They insisted that the Red enemy was lurking within the gates of national power, quietly bending the state to its will. A greater number of conservatives followed the lead of National Review and embedded their anticommunism within a broader, less alarmist critique of modern liberalism. Their discontent was channeled into building a strong network that could take over the Republican Party and transform the national political dialogue. By temperament and doctrine, the two groups were destined to clash.

The John Birch Society (JBS) was the largest organization on the militant Right. Founded in 1958, the JBS disdained ironic subtleties of the Buckley style. The United States, alerted Birch Society founder Robert Welch, heir to a candy company fortune, was at war with “a gigantic conspiracy to enslave mankind; ... [one] controlled by determined, cunning, and utterly ruthless gangsters, willing to use any means to achieve its end.”18 Even President Dwight D. Eisenhower was, according to Welch, complicit in the grand plot, along with nearly every prominent advocate of nuclear disarmament and black
rights, including the justices of the Supreme Court. Given the immensity of the threat, the JBS counterattacked in remarkably pacific ways: letter writing, radio commentary, billboards calling for the impeachment of Chief Justice Earl Warren, and selling alarmist literature through its own American Opinion bookstores. The obvious prosperity of most JBS members may have argued against more forceful means. But smaller groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the Minutemen who held a similar worldview did commit bombings and other acts of violence.

The 1960 election of John Kennedy, an avowed liberal, heightened the distress of dedicated anticommunists, and the Birch Society boomed. By 1963, the JBS had close to 100,000 members, and its bookstores proliferated in Sunbelt suburbs. Mainstream journalists and scholars labeled the JBS and such kindred groups as the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade “radical,” “paranoid,” and “extremist.” But militant rightists dismissed the charges as enemy propaganda; they would persever in telling uncomfortable truths.

In large parts of the South and West, the core of their gospel was quite popular. Conservative activists could deny or ignore Welch’s wilder accusations but still affirm that the nation faced a dire challenge from a hydra-headed “collectivist” beast. In booming Orange County, California, the JBS boasted 38 chapters full of white doctors and dentists, engineers, small business people, middle-class housewives—and several congressmen. Ad hoc local groups with names like Citizens for Fundamental Education and the Californians’ Committee to Combat Communism attracted thousands of other citizens.

These conservatives regarded the national Democratic Party and its union and civil rights allies as dedicated enemies of freedom. Moderate Republicans, in their view, were no better. In 1964, Phyllis Schlafly, leader of GOP women’s clubs, wrote a popular book charging that “a small group of secret king makers, using hidden persuaders and psychological warfare techniques” had “manipulated” the party “to nominate candidates who had sidestepped or suppressed the key issues.” By election day, her book, *A Choice Not an Echo*, had sold 3.5 million copies.

The grassroots Right demanded that the party stop behaving as a “dime-store New Deal” (Goldwater’s pithy dig at the Eisenhower administration). Only the nomination of a presidential candidate sworn to protect individual and business freedom at home and take the offensive against communism abroad would do.19

Why did the Right gain so much support in Orange County? Since the beginning of World War II, the county had changed from a fruit-growing center into a beehive of military and aerospace production. New residents tended to be culturally conservative Protestants or Catholics who were ideologically committed to the same Cold War that guaranteed their prosperity. They saw no contradiction between damning “big government” and living well thanks to increasing federal outlays for the military and aerospace in-
duilities. Encouragement and funds came from such local businessmen as Walter Knott of Knott's Berry Farm and Patrick Frawley of the Schick Razor Company, who had long resented moderate Republicans based in the East for compromising with the liberal enemy. In addition, Cardinal Francis McIntyre, head of the Roman Catholic Church in southern California, sent his priests to JBS forums to educate themselves about communism. Thus in Orange County, the militant Right was not “extreme” at all. Indeed, it was a logical movement to join if one were a middle-class white Christian who believed that his or her values were under siege.20

The Right also established an energetic movement on college campuses. In the 1950s, the small Intercollegiate Society of Individualists experimented with tactics the New Left would later make commonplace. ISI members published newspapers that challenged liberal opinion, wrote sharp critiques of liberal textbooks used in their economics and political science classes, and mounted street demonstrations in favor of the House Un-American Activities Committee while their left-wing counterparts protested against it. Then, in the fall of 1960, young admirers of Barry Goldwater, who had given a graceful address to that year’s Republican convention, created Young Americans for Freedom. From the first, YAF, unlike the more scholarly ISI, was ensnared in political battles within the Republican Party and against powerful liberals, and it rapidly signed up some 25,000 members.

YAF set down its creed at a founding conference held in 1960 at William F. Buckley's family estate in Sharon, Connecticut. The Sharon Statement, largely written by 26-year-old journalist M. Stanton Evans, was a crisp synopsis of conservative principles. “In this time of moral and political crisis,” it vowed to preserve “freedom” and defined that ubiquitous term as encompassing the market economy, victory over communism, and limited powers for government. The first issue of YAF's official journal, The New Guard, stated, “Ten years ago this magazine would not have been possible. Twenty years ago it would not have been dreamed of. Thirty-five years ago it would not have been necessary.”21

Here was a rebellion that sought not to transform society but to revive the spirit of an earlier and presumably better order, free from the benighted “isms which have poisoned the minds, weakened the wills and smothered the spirits of Americans for three decades and more,” as YAF phrased it. Like members of the burgeoning New Left, young rightists railed against the sway of liberal professors and administrators. “A conscious effort is constantly being made by instructors to liberalize the thinking of their students,” complained one University of Minnesota undergraduate.22 YAF members were sometimes accused (by their adversaries) of “arrogance” and bad manners.

But such qualities drove campus conservatives to the lectern and the party caucus rather than into the streets. During its heyday in the early '60s, YAF was mainly composed of young people from pious backgrounds who sought
out elders to lionize not condemn. The strongest chapters tended to be located at Catholic colleges like Fordham and Notre Dame; most activists followed the lead of National Review and looked forward to a career in electoral politics. Annual YAF conventions typically ended with a formal banquet, at which men in suits and women in cocktail dresses gathered to hear speeches by the likes of William F. Buckley and to give awards to such heroes as Russell Kirk and Herbert Kohler, a toilet manufacturer who was an inveterate foe of labor unions.

The first effort that united all contingents of the New Right was the campaign to elect Barry Goldwater president in 1964. The campaign, conducted with crusading fervor, did more than anything else to make American conservatism a mass phenomenon. In 1963 an avid circle of boosters organized themselves into a secret Draft Goldwater Committee headquartered in midtown New York City. Led by the veteran Republican strategist F. Clifton “Chif” White, they fanned out around the country, recruiting activists (many from YAF) and converting likely GOP convention delegates. On July 4 of that year, a rally to boost support for Goldwater drew almost 9000 people. In the crowd, remembered one organizer, were

truck drivers with tattoos, . . . right-wingers convinced that Wall Street and the Kremlin were conspiring to run the world, Southern whites who had faith in the Cross and the Flag, retired people on Social Security worried about inflation, Westerners tired of catering to Easterners, anticomunists demanding action against Cuba and Khrushchev, small business-men fighting a losing battle against government rules and regulations, readers of The Conscience of a Conservative, high school and college rebels looking for a cause.23

By the time Goldwater agreed to be a candidate, he already had a huge advantage over any other hopeful.

In 1964 the organization mobilized a movement. In the weeks before the California primary, 8000 members of YAF, the Birch Society, and the Young Republicans visited over 600,000 households in the state. A nationwide direct mail campaign netted far more money than any other presidential candidate had received in that way. Most contributors gave $100 or less, unlike the Democrats, who relied on wealthier donors. Goldwater’s new breed overwhelmed the rather staid GOP officials in many areas. “I was plagued by zealots who flocked to the cause,” remembered a more orthodox Republican, “They were uncontrollable. They cared nothing about the Republican Party, only about their hero.”24

Once nominated, Goldwater determined that Americans would hear the conservative verities, blunt and undiluted. During his acceptance speech, he proclaimed, “Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. Moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue.” The candidate favored making Social Security a voluntary program and selling off the network of dams and utilities
known as the Tennessee Valley Authority that had brought cheap electric power to millions of homes. He also opposed the nuclear test ban treaty and favored allowing NATO commanders to use nuclear weapons against the Soviets, if they decided that were necessary. “In Your Heart, You Know He’s Right,” read his billboards and bumper stickers. A pro-Johnson wag changed the GOP slogan to read, “In Your Guts, You Know He’s Nuts.”

Goldwater also continued to denounce the Civil Rights Act that Congress had passed the previous June. The legislation, he charged (erroneously), “would force you to admit drunks, a known murderer, or an insane person into your place of business” and to hire “incompetent” workers. Laws, he protested, could never change the way white racists felt about blacks.

Lyndon Johnson’s landslide victory that November surprised no one save the most myopic Goldwater disciples, who thought that millions of “hidden conservatives” would miraculously surface to rescue the GOP. Only in the South did the Goldwater campaign live up to its hopes. A few years before, the senator had essentially written off the black vote when he advised “hunting where the ducks are” to build support below the Mason–Dixon line. Now,
for the first time since Reconstruction, a Republican won a majority in Mississippi and Alabama, South Carolina, Georgia, and Louisiana. Goldwater ran close in every other southern state, except for the president's native Texas. Across Dixie, whites split their vote about equally between the two candidates. The hostility to black rights and to the "outsiders" who supported them had found a home in the party of Abraham Lincoln.

The Goldwater campaign had another consequence: it transformed the Right from a small, largely intellectual phenomenon into a huge grassroots force. Many future conservative leaders first threw themselves into national politics during this seemingly hopeless effort: William Rehnquist, Michael Deaver, Jesse Helms, Phyllis Schlafly, George Will, and Patrick Buchanan, among others. Years later, Buchanan rhapsodized, "Like a first love, the Goldwater campaign was, for thousands of men and women now well into middle age, an experience that will never recede from memory." Then he invoked Shakespeare's Henry V: "We were there on St. Crispin's Day."²⁶

The conservatives who had flooded into the GOP were not about to cede it back to the hated "Eastern Establishment." Across the broad Sunbelt stretching from the beaches of Virginia to the jet factories of Orange County, conservatives increased their numbers and their influence in local politics. And the Republican Party was utterly changed; since the early '60s, the Right has exercised great, usually decisive, influence over the GOP's platform and choice of national candidates. No Republican has been elected president without strong conservative backing. Just after the 1964 election, an editorial cartoonist depicted Goldwater and a woman, dressed as the parents of a new bride, waving goodbye to their daughter. The politician consoled his "wife," "Look at it this way... We haven't lost a presidency; we've gained a party!"²⁷

Now conservatives had to persuade Democratic voters to look past the "extremist" label. In 1966 a 55-year-old actor making his first run for public office showed them how. Ronald Reagan had been a liberal Democrat for most of his adult life; during the 1940s, he served as president of the Screen Actors Guild and campaigned for both Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. A growing dislike for government regulation of business and a deep-seated hatred of communism drew him rightward during the 1950s. In 1964, near the end of the fall campaign, the retired actor delivered a televised speech for Goldwater that was more impressive than any address the nominee himself had delivered.

Reagan adeptly turned the rhetoric of the New Deal on its head. He spoke with the same reassuring empathy and scorn for unearned favors from government that had once helped liberals gain the allegiance of working-class whites, both North and South. Reagan simply replaced older stories of workers abused by corporate power with fresh anecdotes about women leaving their husbands so they could be eligible to receive big welfare checks.

In 1966 Reagan ran for the governorship of California as a "citizen-politician." He declared himself free of entanglements to any existing struc-
ture of power—despite his close ties to the Goldwater wing of the GOP and the financial backing of a ring of wealthy businessmen from the Los Angeles basin. His campaign zeroed in on the kinds of outrages “law and order” was intended to remedy: the Watts riot, the radical student movement at the University of California, and the mounting rate of violent crime. Reagan also trumpeted his opposition to open housing laws—and to the state supreme court’s attempt to override the public will on that volatile issue. In 1964 California voters, by a 2–1 margin, had turned down the Rumford Act, which sought to make discrimination in real estate transactions illegal. When the court declared the results of that vote invalid, it allowed Reagan to wave the banner of democracy and to claim “infringement of one of our basic individual rights” by a clique of unelected judges. 38

Still, California Democrats were not overly concerned. Reagan’s opponent was Edmund “Pat” Brown, the two-term incumbent governor whose last opponent had been Richard Nixon. Brown had dedicated his administration to promoting the growth and prestige of his state. During his eight years in office, the freeway system was completed, an ultramodern water system perfected, and the state university expanded and elevated into one of the finest in the world. Brown’s fervent endorsement of the war in Vietnam shielded him from the wrath of all but the most eccentric anticommunists. In fact, angry left-wing opponents of the war saw no great difference between Brown and Reagan. How could this confident chief executive of the nation’s most populous state lose to an actor who had supported the “extremist” Barry Goldwater?

Reagan, however, was a skillful campaigner who united the Republican Party and ensured that groups like the Birch Society would not tarnish his mainstream image. He told reporters who grilled him about the Birchers, “Any members of the society who support me will be buying my philosophy. I won’t be buying theirs.” 39 The same advertising firm that had worked for Nelson Rockefeller in 1964 crafted Reagan’s television messages. Brown’s campaign manager later praised the GOP candidate for using an inviting, even humorous tone when he attacked welfare mothers and student protesters. “Most of the cracks aren’t very fair, and some of them aren’t very nice. But they work off the predictable resentments and emotions of his audiences, without requiring him to be harsh or abrasive.” 40

Against an opponent who was riding a wave of popular disgust, Brown continued to bash Reagan’s former profession—forgetting how many residents had been attracted to the state because of the imagery and industry that was Hollywood. One of Brown’s most frequently televised ads showed the governor addressing an integrated class of schoolchildren. “I’m running against an actor, and you know who shot Lincoln, don’t cha?” 41 Reagan won by just short of a million votes.

In 1966, Republicans got good news outside California as well. The party gained 47 seats in the House of Representatives and 3 in the Senate, virtu-
ally ensuring that Lyndon Johnson would get no more sweeping social programs through Congress. Seven other governorships fell to the GOP, including that of Florida, which had not elected a Republican to the statehouse for almost a century.

Animus against liberals and their causes was also growing inside the other major party. In Boston, Louise Day Hicks, an Irish-Catholic Democrat on the elected School Committee, became a heroine to many whites when she resisted state-mandated integration plans. “A small band of racial agitators, non-native to Boston, and a few college radicals,” charged Hicks, were engaged in a “conspiracy to tell the people of Boston how to run their schools, their city, and their lives.” The rejection of racial liberalism also boosted the national hopes of a southern Democrat who was the very symbol of white resistance—George Wallace.

The events of 1963—in the streets of Birmingham and at the University of Alabama—had made the governor something of a celebrity. TV interviewers courted him, and students at northern colleges enjoyed jousting with him. A former amateur boxing champion, Wallace reveled in rhetorical combat. On national television, reporter Anthony Lewis from the New York Times accused Wallace of preventing black citizens in his state from voting. “We don’t have any utopia in Alabama,” the governor acknowledged, “But neither do you have one here in New York City where you can’t walk in Central Park at night without fear of being raped, or mugged, or shot.” Thousands of favorable letters soon arrived at his Montgomery office from all over the nation.

Wallace entered three state presidential primaries in 1964 and did surprisingly well. Against stand-ins for President Johnson, he gained 45 percent in Maryland, 34 percent in Wisconsin, and 30 percent in Indiana. His strongest supporters were small farmers and blue-collar workers, both those of eastern European ancestry and southern migrants who had started coming North during World War II. Against local blacks they brandished law and order like a club. At one Wallace rally in South Milwaukee attended mostly by Polish Americans, the local sponsor, a tavern keeper and ex-marine named Bronko Gruber, ordered two African Americans who refused to stand for the Star-Spangled Banner to leave. Then he asked, “Who is it that beats up our newsboys, rapes our women, attacks old women? You know who it is—it’s your colored brothers. How long can we tolerate this?”

In this and later elections, George Wallace always denied that either he or his supporters were motivated by racism. Ever the adroit counterpuncher, he even charged that “the biggest bigots in the world are . . . the ones who call others bigots,” because they—liberal journalists and radical protesters—dismissed, as a smokescreen for prejudice, the concerns of ordinary whites about job security and safe streets. But, fueled partly by the national media that wished him no good, the impression persisted that Wallace’s political strength was the direct product of antiblack feelings that he skillfully whipped
up with the use of “code words” like “law and order” and “neighborhood schools.”

But Wallace also used the racial crisis of the 1960s to draw a class line between two different groups of white people. He would needle liberal congressmen for sending their own children to private schools and insist that all he wanted was for parents to have a choice about where their children would be educated. “We’re not talking about race,” he protested, “we’re talking about local democratic institutions.” His favorite targets were powerful judges, “bureaucrats,” and “theoreticians” (their whiteness assumed) who wanted to foist “absurd” blueprints for change on average men and women. That many of those blueprints were attempts to aid black people was an essential element in the resistance mounted against them. But so was a widening cultural gulf between European Americans that had as much to do with differences of class and with moral judgments as it did with their opinions about the rights of African Americans.

As a populist spokesman on the right, Wallace accomplished something unique. He managed to look and sound more like an ordinary, working American than did anyone of prominence on the contemporary white Left, dominated as it was by activists bred in at least modest comfort. In his personal style as well as his words, Wallace exuded a feisty self-confidence, a combative defensiveness, and a pride in his background that appealed to millions of white Americans (more of them male than female) who worked with their hands or felt close to those who did.

The Alabamian had a canny regard for the particulars of wage-earning, small-property-holding white society. Unlike conventional politicians, Wallace fondly named the specific kinds of (white) Americans for whom he claimed to speak, thereby dignifying their occupations and honoring their anonymous lives: “the bus driver, the truck driver, the beautician, the fireman, the policeman, and the steelworker, the plumber, and the communications worker, and the oil worker and the little businessman.”

Wallace’s tastes and bearing amplified his words. He had a common, rough quality that fascinated and/or repelled observers who expected aspirants for the presidency to carry themselves with relaxed dignity and to dress like big-city bankers. The governor slicked back his hair, wore inexpensive suits, and unapologetically admitted that he “put ketchup on everything.” Moreover, his performance before crowds was designed not to inspire but to incite; he told hecklers to cut off their beards, dared “anarchists” to lie down in front of his car, and mused about how “mean” a steelworker in the White House would be. One conservative writer compared him to “Edward G. Robinson in the days of Little Caesar” and quipped, “he can strut sitting down.”

Blue-collar belligerence was a major element in Wallace’s appeal. But his authenticity did have a softer side. A son of the plebeian South, he declared
his adherence to evangelical Protestantism and his love for country music. The former allowed him to scorn “the liberal circles” for thinking “their minds are the greatest things in the universe and denying that there is a God Who made all of us.” The latter, aided by endorsements from such popular recording artists as Marty Robbins and Hank Snow, gave him a connection to a musical style whose popularity was exploding: by 1970, there were over 650 AM radio stations exclusively broadcasting country songs; a decade earlier, fewer than 100 had existed. “People that listen to the kind of music you are playing tonight,” Wallace said on a TV show in Oklahoma City, “are the people that are going to save this country.”

Such calls for the common folk to make other Americans live right—or else—did not gladden many of the conservatives who had toiled in the Goldwater campaign. Such writers as William F. Buckley, Jr. cherished the calm defense of laissez-faire economics and spiritual order. Wallace’s constant jibes at “pseudo-intellectuals,” his support of welfare programs in his own state, and his appeal to racial prejudice struck him as the acts of a demagogue willing to shout anything to win votes. Several other National Review contributors argued vehemently that, as Frank Meyer wrote, Wallace’s populism was “the radical opposite of conservatism” and would “poison the moral source of its strength.” Buckley privately referred to the Alabamian as “Mr. Evil” and, in a televised debate, branded him a racist and a would-be dictator.

The geographic spread and obvious power of the white backlash required conservatives like Buckley to perform a difficult balancing act. On the one hand, they cheered the assertion of community and local rights against the liberal “establishment.” Finally, ordinary Americans were rebelling against politicians, judges, and intellectuals in thrall to “social engineering.” On the other hand, few of the voters who rallied to Hicks, Wallace, or Ronald Reagan were disenchanted with government largesse. They demanded that the state stop favoring blacks and the poor; they had little quarrel with such favorite targets of the Right as Social Security, the minimum wage, or the new Medicare program. And the rough, sometimes violent cast of places like South Milwaukee and Marquette Park gave pause to conservatives who revered the life of the mind and the lifestyle of benevolent aristocrats. If “the people” were suddenly veering rightward, could veterans of the Right control them?

The upcoming presidential election lent some urgency to the question. Conservatives of all stripes had gained strength since the debacle of 1964. Now they had to decide how to wield that influence, both to gain the White House and to promote their larger ideological agenda. Of one thing they were sure: less than a decade after he’d written it, Barry Goldwater’s brazen assertion of 1960 sounded almost like common sense. Perhaps America was a conservative nation after all.
CHAPTER 12

1968

You're either part of the solution or part of the problem.
—Eldridge Cleaver, black revolutionary

Significant change seldom respects the calendar. But, on occasion, a single year fills up with revolutions—attempted and dreaded, imagined and repressed. In 1848 the common people of every major nation in western and central Europe revolted against their hereditary monarchs and landlords. In 1919 mass uprisings led by radical socialists erupted in Italy, Germany, and Hungary. In China, the Communist Party was born amid a nationalist uprising. That same year, one-fifth of all U.S. workers went out on strike, and many Americans feared (while a few hoped) that the Bolshevik victory in Russia was about to be repeated on their side of the Atlantic. Then, in 1989, citizen movements helped bring about the collapse of European communism in a heap of debased ideals, authoritarian governments, and falling walls. Many of the revolutions launched in those years failed or took decades more to triumph. But, in each case, what had occurred transformed utterly what was to come.

1968 was that kind of year. Insurgencies against the dominant political and economic order broke out in every industrial nation, nearly always led by men and women under the age of 25. Similar movements behaved, quite self-consciously, in similar ways. In West Berlin, thousands of radicals braved high-pressure water cannons to attack the state for employing former Nazis and a right-wing media magnate for inciting violence against the left. Outside Tokyo, snake-dancing demonstrators tried to stop the building of a massive new airport on land belonging to small farmers. In France, a demand for co-ed dormitories mushroomed into a national student strike that aimed to overthrow the president of the country and, as one wall poster put it, to “decree a permanent state of happiness.” The student revolt touched off a walk-out by 10 million workers. In Mexico City, soldiers and police massacred hundreds of students who had shut down their universities to protest earlier acts of repression. In Prague, Czech and Slovak collegians spent the spring
in passionate debates about how to create “socialism with a human face.” In August, they had to face down the crews of invading Soviet tanks.

Rebels from the shores of the Pacific to the banks of the Danube shared a taste for denim, electric guitars, and marijuana. The realities of the Cold War did, however, make for clashing political agendas. Radicals in Europe, Japan, and the United States rooted for the victory of the Communist-led revolutionaries in Vietnam, and at the same time, for the success of the rebellion against Soviet domination in eastern Europe. If there was inconsistency there, they did not notice. But young dissenters in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere in Eastern Europe had abandoned faith in anyone who claimed legacy from Lenin and Stalin. Such divergent viewpoints made a true global New Left impossible.

1968 was the pivot of the American decade. Young radicals emerged from events tinged with violence to proclaim that a revolution was in the making. But politicians tested public opinion and quickly learned that most voters craved order and thought the nation had already undergone all the change it could handle. Every season of the year shook with that conflict—between an increasingly daring and insurrectionary “Movement” and the forces, elite and popular, who were eager to put it down.

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**WINTER: TET**

Early in the morning of January 31, the revolution came to Saigon. The capital city of South Vietnam, bloated with war refugees to a population of nearly 4 million, was slumbering through a cease-fire to mark the lunar new year, the Tet holiday in which Vietnamese traditionally pay homage to their ancestors. Remains of firecrackers littered the quiet streets.

Then, just before 3 A.M., nineteen Viet Cong commandos drove up to the U.S. embassy and began a bold attempt to capture the prime symbol of American power in their country. They blew a hole in the wall and began advancing, weapons blazing, on the compound itself. Thus began the “general offensive and uprising” the Communists hoped would bring a rapid end to the Saigon regime and force its American protectors to withdraw. On the same day, 80,000 Viet Cong guerrillas launched assaults on every major city in South Vietnam, risking their lives to bring about what Communist leader Ho Chi Minh predicted would be “total victory.”

The war lasted another seven gory years before that outcome came to pass. The raid on the American embassy was a virtual suicide mission, which U.S. forces were able to crush before noon. The Viet Cong failed to hold any city for more than a few weeks; fully half their fighters died in the offensive. And their vaunted uprising never occurred; most urban dwellers ran for safety.
instead of rallying to “liberation” as the guerrillas had expected. Thousands
of South Vietnamese soldiers did throw down their arms and desert, but the
Viet Cong emerged from the offensive a much weaker fighting force than at
its outset. For the remainder of the war, troops from the regular North Viet-
namese army did most of the fighting on the Communist side.

But the Tet offensive succeeded in a manner its planners had not antici-
pated. It ended a grand American illusion and altered the course of the con-
{}flict: before Tet, U.S. officials, from President Lyndon Johnson on down,
{}assured the public the war was gradually but surely being won; what General
William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in South Vietnam, called
“the light at the end of the tunnel” seemed to be glowing more brightly. Af-
c{ }ter the offensive, no one was foolish enough to make such statements. At the
{}end of February, respected TV broadcaster Walter Cronkite, who to that point
{}had been uncritical of the war effort, spoke for many Americans when he in-
toned on the evening news that it was “more certain than ever that the bloody
{}experience of Vietnam is to end in stalemate.” Clark Clifford, then the new
{}secretary of defense, later confessed, “Tet, to me, was the roof falling in.”

Suddenly, the war had moved from the jungle into the city, heightening
{}its visibility in new and uncomfortable ways. In Saigon, two cameramen
filmed the chief of the national police executing a captured Viet Cong guerrilla with a pistol at point-blank range; fragments of the prisoner's brain spurted from his head as he fell. In the Mekong Delta, U.S. planes drove enemy forces out of the city of Ben Tre by reducing the provincial capital of 140,000 inhabitants to rubble. The major in charge explained, without a hint of irony, “It became necessary to destroy the town to save it.”

For American GIs, Tet touched off the bloodiest and most frustrating year of the war. Battles with North Vietnamese troops claimed thousands of casualties on both sides, with neither able to win a clear victory. Racial hostilities escalated within U.S. ranks, mirroring the riots and backlash back home. At rear echelon camps in South Vietnam, black and white GIs argued, sometimes violently, when Confederate flags were flown or enlisted men’s clubs played country and western tunes instead of soul music. Soldiers out in the bush were filled with tension, more unsure than ever about which Vietnamese to treat as enemies and which to regard as friends.

On March 16 the members of one infantry company snapped. On patrol in Quang Ngai Province, soldiers from the Americal Division entered the hamlet of My Lai, looking for Viet Cong guerrillas. Finding the villagers uncooperative, the GIs savagely murdered at least 347 of them with grenades, bayonets, bullets, and fire, then hurled most of the bodies into a shallow ditch. Army officials covered up the story for 20 months, before it spilled out into the American press. But they could not stem the mounting rage of GIs who, whether or not they committed atrocities, had been sent to fight a war they could neither understand nor win.

For the warmakers in Washington, Tet made a painful decision unavoidable. Most Americans, according to opinion polls, no longer believed the conflict would end in a U.S. victory, short of using nuclear weapons that risked touching off World War III. Four days before the My Lai massacre, the New York Times headlined a request by top army brass to send 206,000 more GIs to Vietnam, and an immediate public outcry resulted. Worse still, the long, expensive war had touched off an inflationary spiral that was jeopardizing the postwar boom. In February speculators in Europe began to bid up the price of gold and to sell off dollars, signaling their lack of faith in the future of the U.S. economy. The Johnson administration managed to end the crisis but not before the president warned western Europe’s prime ministers that “these financial disorders can . . . set in motion forces like those which disintegrated the Western world” during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Lyndon Johnson, once considered the master politician of his era, was now in danger of losing the nomination of his own party. Before Tet, Eugene McCarthy, a bookish and rather obscure anti-war senator from Minnesota, announced he would take on the president in a string of primaries. After the Tet offensive, McCarthy remarked, “Only a few months ago we were told that 65 per cent of the [South Vietnamese] population was secure. Now we know
that even the American embassy is not secure." On March 12 McCarthy
came within a few thousand votes of winning the New Hampshire primary.
The stunning result convinced New York senator Robert Kennedy, charis-
matic brother of the late president, to throw his own hat into the ring. Polls
showed that either he or Richard Nixon, the expected Republican nominee,
would draw more votes than the president.

In late March the political costs of the Tet offensive came due. President
Johnson called together an eminent group of past and present makers of for-
eign policy to help him decide what to do about Vietnam. Many of these
"Wise Men" were key architects of the Cold War and had close ties to Wall
Street and big industrial corporations. They fretted that escalating the war
would mean more civil unrest, in the ghettos and on campuses, as domestic
ills were neglected; it might also touch off a more severe financial crisis.
Soberly, they advised the president that it was time to stop. As former sec-
rectary of state Dean Acheson put it, "We can no longer do the job we set out
to do in the time we have left and we must begin to take steps to disengage."*8

On March 31 the president heeded their words. He had already decided
against ordering a major increase in U.S. troops. Now, in a televised address,
he announced a halt to the bombing of most of North Vietnam and a willing-
ness to begin peace talks with the enemy. Then, at the end of the speech,
Johnson, usually a plodding and undramatic speaker, shocked the nation: "I
have concluded that I should not permit the presidency to become involved
in the partisan divisions that are developing in this political year. Accord-
ingly, I shall not seek and I will not accept the nomination of my party for
another term as your president." Withdrawal from the race was the most
popular thing LBJ had done in years; within a week, the president’s job ap-
proval rating jumped 13 points. Antiwar protesters were jubilant, although
few expected the war to end soon.

SPRING: MEMPHIS AND MORNINGSIDE HEIGHTS

Johnson’s impending retirement from politics also lifted the hopes of Amer-
ica’s most celebrated activist for peace and human rights. The year had not
been going well for the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. In January he had
launched a Poor People’s Campaign to mount “massive, active, non-violent
resistance to the evils” of an economic system that seemed to reward the self-
ish and to punish the unfortunate. In private, King even advocated “a de-
mocratic form of socialism.” But organizing for the new campaign sputtered
as some of his closest advisers doubted the wisdom of a plan to fill down-
town Washington with “waves of the nation’s poor and disinheritected” until
Congress funded either a jobs program or a guaranteed annual income.
At the same time, King feared that white resistance, and the tough rhetoric of some Black Power advocates, would ignite another round of big city violence. “We cannot stand two more summers like last summer,” he told a mostly white audience on March 31, “without leading inevitably to a rightwing takeover and a fascist state.” On top of such public woes, King’s constant travel and frequent sexual liaisons were gradually destroying his marriage.

But his energy seldom flagged, and he kept looking for opportunities to link the causes of racial equality and economic justice. Since February, King had been traveling periodically to Memphis to support a strike by black sanitation workers. He viewed the garbagemen’s ordeal as a microcosm of the problems faced by millions of the working poor in a land of plenty. The Memphis workers, who belonged to a segregated workforce, earned just a bit more than minimum wage (with no vacations or pensions) for cleaning the streets of a city renowned for its blues clubs and the estate of Elvis Presley.

Memphis officials, unlike many of their counterparts across the river in Mississippi, did not snarl at any mention of civil rights. But neither were they concerned with the troubles of their black constituents, half of whom lived below the poverty line. When 1300 sanitation men went on strike, Mayor Henry Loeb ordered them to return to work and announced he would never recognize their union. The workers took to the streets, wearing sandwich boards reading simply “I AM A MAN.”

By early spring, the mayor had not changed his mind. Frustrated young black activists were on the verge of tearing their own movement apart. On March 28, King walked at the head of a mass march by sanitation workers and their supporters and watched in horror as militants smashed store windows and battled with police. The renowned symbol of nonviolent resistance was rushed away by the authorities, as the melee raged. “Maybe we just have to give up and let violence take its course,” King lamented that night to Rev. Ralph Abernathy, his best friend and coworker. “Ralph, we live in a sick nation.”

Rev. James Lawson, a local Methodist pastor and a founder of SNCC, attacked the young militants, who called themselves the Invaders, for chanting Black Power slogans and abandoning the cause of nonviolence. They demanded a role in planning demonstrations and suggested that Lawson and King were out of touch with an angry black community. The split mirrored one developing among African Americans nationwide: older activists wanted to keep trying to influence powerful whites through peaceful protest, while younger ones declared that nothing short of a black-led revolution would cleanse the nation of its racial sins.

As King’s ability to control events diminished, the peril to his person seemed to grow. Every day he received multiple death threats; routinely, he rejected advice that he hire bodyguards. “I can’t lead that kind of life,” King told a Georgia newspaper editor, “There’s no way in the world you can keep
somebody from killing you if they really want to kill you." On April 3, King was back in Memphis to help the battling factions organize another march. That evening, he showed up at a half-filled auditorium and told the crowd not to worry about him. "I've seen the promised land," he declared. "I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And so I'm happy tonight . . . I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."  

The next day was filled with meetings. Just after 6 P.M., King took a break, relaxing on a motel balcony and bantering with aides, among them Jesse Jackson. King asked the leader of a band close to Jackson to play a favorite gospel song that night. "Ben, make sure you play 'Precious Lord, Take My Hand,' . . . Sing it real pretty!" Moments later, a rifle bullet tore into the right side of King's face; the great orator never spoke again. Earlier that day, King had called to arrange the Sunday sermon at his own Ebenezer Baptist Church back in Atlanta. The title was "Why America May Go to Hell."  

News of the murder, committed by an escaped white convict named James Earl Ray, convinced thousands of black people that the present was damnable enough. They poured into the streets of over 120 cities to express their grief
and rage in a spasm of collective violence. In San Francisco, every store window was broken along Haight Street, recently the mecca for those seeking “peace and love” in a psychedelic haze. In Baltimore and Kansas City, the National Guard patrolled black neighborhoods to stop looting and burning. In Chicago, Mayor Richard Daley gave police orders to “shoot to kill” any arsonists, after a large swath of the city’s impoverished West Side went up in flames.

One of the most devastating riots, and certainly the most visible one, erupted in Washington, D.C. “Now that they’ve taken Dr. King off, it’s time to end this non-violence bullshit,” vowed Stokely Carmichael, the SNCC organizer who had persevered through brutal days in the Deep South when movement activists suffered beatings and murder without fighting back. Just hours after getting the grim news from Memphis, members of Congress could look out their office windows and see flames and hear breaking glass. Soldiers even set up machine guns on the steps of the Capitol.

By any material reckonings, the riot was an irrational act. Twelve black Washingtonians died, and the $25 million in damage was concentrated along 14th Street, NW, home to theaters and other businesses where local residents had long worked and played. But the violence was also a carnival of the oppressed: euphoric crowds looted fancy clothes and liquor stores and, laughing, ran away from police. “The Black people in this city were really happy for three days,” reported a government worker, “they have been kicked so long, and this is the one high spot in their life.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. occupied a unique place in American political life. As Stokely Carmichael remembered, the inspiring preacher “was the one man of our race that this country’s older generations, the militants and the revolutionaries and the masses of black people would still listen to.” King’s funeral symbolized that status. So many national politicians and celebrities such as Jacqueline Kennedy and Motown star Diana Ross attended that little room was left in Ebenezer Baptist for its parishioners. But then some 50,000 mourners, representing a cross section of black America and white liberalism, followed King’s mule-driven casket on a five-mile march to his alma mater, Morehouse College. It was probably the saddest demonstration of their lives.

King’s murder and the riots that followed confirmed that what the black leader had feared was coming to pass: the shattering of his fragile, radical dream of a nonviolent, integrated society. The intransigence of most whites and black anger at the slow pace of change were creating a vicious cycle that would be difficult to reverse. If King had lived, his influence might only have continued to wane.

The fate of the Poor People’s Campaign was instructive. In May a few thousand people traveled to Washington to embody King’s vision of an interracial movement that would pry open federal coffers to help the jobless and destitute. On the Mall, participants erected a shantytown of tents called Resurrection City from which they planned to picket and sit in at govern-
ment buildings. But heavy rains, violence among participants, and an increasingly conservative Congress soon put SCLC organizers on the defensive. At the end of June, police arrested the fewer than 200 protesters still camped out on the Mall. Without a united dynamic movement behind him, one man, alive or martyred, could not alter the course of history.

At the same time, in New York City, a spirit of rebellion was seizing white and black student radicals at Columbia University, which borders on Harlem. Some students disrupted an official memorial meeting for Dr. King with charges that the school administration was “completely racist toward the community and toward its employees.” On April 23 a biracial group of radicals began a campus sit-in at Hamilton Hall. The next morning, the black protesters, uneasy partners of the mostly white Students for a Democratic Society, asked the SDS activists to find their own building to occupy.

The protest soon expanded; two days later, hundreds of students and other young people were living inside five barricaded university buildings. Inside cavernous Low Library, protesters slept in the president’s office, smoked his cigars, drank his sherry, and rifled through his files for politically incriminating documents.

Life inside the “liberated” buildings was tense but passionate, sleepless yet amusing. Constant meetings took place but so did a marriage. “We went out on the balcony,” remembered Richard Eagan and Andrea Boroff, “and the [university] chaplain proclaimed us children of a new age. There were flowers. There was cake. They took us out and marched us around campus with people banging on pots and pans. . . . Someone had keys to a faculty office and they gave us a honeymoon suite.”

The rebels pressed specific demands on the Columbia administration, whose main response to months of student organizing had been to ban protests inside campus buildings. Radicals insisted that the university stop building a gymnasium in a nearby park, which would have excluded local black residents, and that Columbia sever all ties to an institute that conducted military research for the government.

But, as SDS firebrand Mark Rudd admitted, “the issue is not the issue.” For black and white radicals alike, the gym and the defense institute were merely good examples of what needed to be changed; battling against them was but one step along the road to revolution. The young occupiers viewed Columbia as a pillar of the system responsible for ghettoizing the residents of Harlem, exploiting the garbage workers of Memphis, and raining death on the peasants of Vietnam. Their movement aimed to expose campus “complicity” with evil and, somehow, to transform Columbia from a training ground of the elite into a place dedicated to serving poor and working-class New Yorkers. Being normal 20-year-olds, most also meant to have some fun in the process.

Eight days after the occupations began, Columbia authorities decided to end them. Police entered the buildings and arrested almost 600 students. The
black students marched out of Hamilton Hall in disciplined ranks and were
arrested peacefully—police feared setting off the wrath of Harlem. But the
white students refused to dismantle their barricades; in one building, pro-
esters soaped down the stairs to slow the inevitable. With clubs, blackjacks,
and fists, the police returned the university to its legal owners. The bloody
resolution provoked a student strike far more popular than the building
takeovers themselves. “This was unlike a labor dispute,” observed a veteran
mediator after failing to resolve the crisis, “in that it was in the interests of
one of the disputants, SDS, not to settle.”

The student rebellion at Columbia was, at the time, the most prolonged
of its kind at a major university—and the first at an Ivy League school. As
hundreds of journalists recorded the events, radicals flocked to applaud and
participate in what they believed was a tactical breakthrough for their de-
veloping struggle. Black Power spokesmen Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap
Brown came from Harlem to confer with the students inside Hamilton Hall.
“If the university doesn’t deal with our brothers in there,” Brown announced,
“they’re going to have to deal with the brothers out on the streets.” SDS
founder Tom Hayden helped occupy a building and was soon calling for “two,
three, many Columbias” to force U.S. leaders to choose between radical change
and the military occupation of American campuses. But the Columbia rebels proved more successful at stirring up their oppo-
nents than at advancing their ultimate goals. Most politicians were out-
raged and blamed administrators for not calling in the cops sooner. “SDS tac-
tics have succeeded in crippling a great university,” charged a Republican
congressman, “the next target can be City Hall, the State Capitol, or even the
White House.” A minority of faculty members made common cause with
SDS and the black occupiers. Others agreed with Columbia historian Richard
Hofstadter who accused student radicals of threatening the university’s com-
mitment to “certain basic values of freedom, rationality, inquiry, [and] dis-
cussion” in the name of a dogma called “liberation.” SDS members and their
black allies countered that universities like Columbia were training grounds
for an elite that was exploiting ghetto dwellers and slaughtering Vietnamese.
What was so rational about that?

Meanwhile, the federal government stepped up the eavesdropping, infil-
tration, and harassment of the New Left—usually at the express instructions
of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. In the aftermath of the Columbia events,
Hoover ordered his agents to set up a “COINTELPRO” operation specifically
targeting SDS and other radical organizations.

In June 1968, for example, FBI agents wrote a letter to the Los Angeles
Department of Education and sent it out under the fictitious name “Ann Hill,”
supposedly a concerned private citizen of Houston, Texas. The letter was in-
tended to prevent a recently graduated University of Houston student (and
SDS activist) from obtaining a job teaching in the Los Angeles school system. "I feel it is my duty," the letter declared:

to inform you of the background of this girl as she is completely unsuitable in my estimation for teaching youngsters. She was well-known as a radical and troublemaker at the University of Houston. . . . She is extremely promiscuous in her personal life besides being a user of marijuana. She has had numerous beatnik type persons spend the night in her apartment. . . . As you can see this girl is certainly not the proper person to be in charge of and teaching youngsters in yours or any other school system. . . .

FBI agents took hundreds of similar acts until 1971, when COINTELPRO was abruptly terminated after a group stole files from an FBI office near Philadelphia and leaked news of the program’s existence to the media.

Away from the campuses, student revolution usually seemed a contradiction in terms. Most ordinary white Americans felt they had more in common with working-class policemen than with the idealistic Ivy League students the officers had routed. In the two years after the Columbia events, similar confrontations occurred on hundreds of campuses. But, with each takeover, the prospect of building a movement as socially broad as it was tactically daring receded further into the realm of wishful thinking.

SUMMER: CHICAGO AND ATLANTIC CITY

In late August, a larger battle between the Movement and its sworn adversaries took place on a grander stage: the downtown streets of the nation’s second largest city. Chicago officials had lobbied hard to win the contract to host the quadrennial Democratic convention. Mayor Richard Daley raised a war chest from local hotel owners and reminded President Johnson of his loyalty and long service to the party. "He’s been a great president. All you have to do is look at his record," affirmed the mayor. Daley also made clear that, unlike some of his counterparts in other metropolises, he knew how to stop civil unrest before it got out of hand. When Chicago was selected in October, 1967, the mayor declared it “a great honor [which] gives the people of Chicago another opportunity to show why it is the finest and friendliest convention city in the nation.”

Only 10 months later, an amicable gathering was quite impossible. By then, the Democratic Party had split into two warring camps—regulars like Daley who vowed to support the President and clamp down on protest at home versus insurgent liberals who carried the hopes of those who detested the war but still had faith in constitutional remedies. Since elected officials
Robert F. Kennedy, during his 1968 presidential campaign. Source: Chicago Historical Society

and other party insiders chose most of the delegates, Vice President Hubert Humphrey was almost certain to be the Democratic presidential nominee.

But the primaries, which Humphrey avoided, still featured a lively contest between Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy. Both “Gene” and “Bobby” wanted to rescue the Democrats from the swamp of Johnson’s war. But they had quite different strengths and weaknesses. McCarthy inspired thousands of fervent antiwar youths to knock on doors and pass out literature; by entering the race when LBJ still appeared strong, he seemed the candidate of principle. But the erudite senator had little rapport with blue-collar workers and the black and Latino poor who were among the Democrats’ bedrock supporters—and hardly any respect from party bosses.

Kennedy, on the other hand, was a hero in the ghettos and barrios; on the night of King’s assassination, he had gone to the heart of black Indianapolis (where he was contesting the Indiana primary) to communicate his rage and sorrow. Earlier, he had walked with Cesar Chavez in support of the grape strikers. Kennedy’s opposition to welfare payments and his stalwart anticommunism also made him acceptable to white workers. But many liberal
activists mistrusted Kennedy's motives: to them, his late entrance into the race smacked of opportunism and was splitting the ranks of reform. They knew President Johnson could be counted on to block his nomination; the two men had long despised one another.

After Kennedy entered the race in mid-March, he defeated McCarthy in all but one primary (in Oregon). On the night of June 5, Bobby was celebrating a narrow victory in the California race when a psychotic Palestinian nationalist named Sirhan Sirhan took his life. The public's grief was nearly as massive as that which had followed his brother's murder less than five years earlier. In the wake of another Kennedy martyrdom, McCarthy seemed the Democrats' only alternative to four more years of bloodletting and rancor, at home and in Southeast Asia.

Antiwar radicals looked forward to the Chicago convention for a different reason. It was a perfect opportunity to expose the "party of death" in all its ugliness and hypocrisy. The National Mobilization Committee (or "Mobe"), an umbrella body of antiwar groups, planned a large but peaceful march to the amphitheater where the delegates would be meeting. Hundreds of SDS activists came in hopes of convincing McCarthy supporters that change within the party system was unattainable.

Then there were the Yippies, apostles of comic revolution. "Rise up and abandon the creeping meatball! Come all you rebels, youth spirits, rock minstrels, truth seekers, peacock freaks, poets, barricade jumpers, dancers, lovers and artists... We demand the politics of ecstasy... Begin preparations now! Chicago is yours! Do it!"

The invitation was concocted by a small circle of friends—antiwar organizers, rock musicians, Beat artists, freelance hippie activists—who were living and getting high in the lower part of Manhattan Island.

Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin were the ringleaders of the group, but the whole point of Yippie was to defy the top-down structure of mainstream politics and the inhumanity that allegedly flowed from it. "We're not leaders, we're cheerleaders," Hoffman told a reporter. Yippies viewed America much the way the Beats had in the 1950s: as a boring, sexually repressive place, run by anxious men who made war against the poor, the powerless, and the unconventional. Make "revolution for the hell of it" proclaimed Hoffman in a 1968 book. Yippies eschewed the usual repertoire—long-winded analysis, fist-shaking slogans, orderly street protests—that had been mainstays of the Left since the nineteenth century. Instead, they devised humorous events made for television and watched by millions of incipient young rebels who had little interest in a politics that was not entertaining.

The Yippies intended Chicago to be a coming-out party for their vision, "a festival of life" to confront the party of death. They talked about letting greased pigs loose in the streets and then nominating one of the porcine anarchists for president; they mused about lacing the city's water supply with LSD and pre-
dicted that thousands of young rebels would float nude in Lake Michigan, after making love in the parks and on the beaches. Hardly any of this was serious, but media outlets lapped it up. By early August Yippie had begun to fulfill the hopes of its creators; it had become a myth steeped in a crazy brew of what Abbie Hoffman called "risk, drama, excitement, and bullshit." 27

Richard J. Daley was not amused. To the mayor, who lived in the same working-class Catholic neighborhood near the Stockyards where he had been raised, the Yippies and their more earnest allies were a dire threat to the conservative values of most Chicagoans and to the civic order itself. In response, Daley mobilized, with help from the Johnson administration, a security force more massive than the one that had quelled the urban riots in Detroit and Newark the previous summer. All 12,000 city police were put on 12-hour shifts (at least a thousand were outfitted in scruffy clothes to infiltrate the protesters' ranks), some 6000 National Guardsmen were called up and trained to fight mock battles with "hippies," and another 7500 Regular Army troops flew in

At the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago, anti-war demonstrators surround the Logan monument on the edge of Grant Park during a "peace march" from Lincoln Park to downtown.
from their Texas base to squelch any riot that might occur in the black community. The mayor also warned the press: “We don’t anticipate or expect [trouble] unless certain commentators and columnists cause trouble.” Daley’s Chicago would show the nation how to deal with this un-American rabble.

The armed front certainly chilled the antiwar movement. The Yippies had talked about inspiring half a million people to come to dance and demonstrate, but no more than 10,000 attended any protest during the four-day convention in August. The mostly male contingent that did show up was brave or foolhardy enough to go ahead with their plans. And Daley’s policemen were angry enough to make them suffer.

Images of the conflicts that resulted have become as common as any that emerged from the 1960s: Yippies nominating a pig named Pigasus for the nation’s highest office and then immediately losing him to police custody, cops smashing the cameras and heads of journalists trying to cover rampaging protesters, an orderly Mobe march to the amphitheater being turned back by tear gas, helmeted police and National Guardsmen clubbing and macing thousands of demonstrators and bystanders in front of the Hilton Hotel in downtown Chicago—where the only live camera in town (outside the convention hall) beamed the violence to the entire nation for a full 17 minutes.

Democrats watched it all from inside their air-conditioned amphitheater and then denounced one another in the most incendiary terms. From the podium, Connecticut senator Abraham Ribicoff, an antiwar delegate, accused the police of using “Gestapo tactics,” and Richard Daley roared back, “Fuck you you Jews son of a bitch you lousy motherfucker go home.” Fortunately for the mayor, no microphone was close enough to pick up his words. Much later, lip-readers used news footage to decipher them.

To the outnumbered demonstrators and their sympathizers, what occurred in Chicago seemed self-evident: sadistic police, encouraged by the authorities, had trampled on the rights of protesters, most of whom had behaved in a peaceful manner. The attacks on photographers and TV cameramen were viewed as blatant assaults on the First Amendment. The cops were trying to hide their brutality from the nation.

They need not have worried. Most Americans sided with Richard Daley and his police. After both Democrats and protesters had departed, the mayor refused to apologize: “This administration and the people of Chicago,” he said, “would never permit a lawless, violent group of terrorists to menace the lives of millions of people, destroy the purpose of a national political convention and take over the streets.” Pollsters found that respondents, by a margin of almost 2 to 1, approved of his actions. CBS, the leading network at the time, received thousands of letters, 90 percent of which were critical of coverage perceived as favoring the demonstrators.

Fear of disorder and disgust at the protesters’ unruly, sometimes obscene manner led many Americans to identify with any authority willing to do some-
thing to stop the “troublemakers.” African Americans, who had their own stories of police misconduct to tell, were a noticeable exception: 63 percent believed the Chicago cops had used too much force, compared with only 10 percent of whites who felt that way.32

With the election just two months away, Republicans were quietly exultant. Hubert Humphrey emerged from his convention 12 points behind Richard Nixon in the polls. To press their advantage, GOP campaign officials quickly produced a television ad entitled “Failure.” Over images of the violence in Chicago, an announcer asked, rhetorically: “How can a party that can’t keep order in its own backyard hope to keep order in our fifty states?”33

A week later in Atlantic City, a different kind of institution came under attack in a fashion as novel as anything the Yippies had invented. On September 7 some 200 women staged a theatrical demonstration against the Miss America contest. They crowned a sheep, insisted on speaking only to female reporters, and threw a variety of “beauty products”—girdles, false eyelashes, wigs, and bras—into a huge “freedom trash can.” Inside the convention hall, the telecast was briefly halted when 20 ululating protesters unfurled a banner reading “Women’s Liberation.”

By the late ’60s, the pageant, begun almost half-a-century earlier, was no longer held in high esteem across the cultural spectrum. Liberal commentators made fun of its ever smiling, verbally vapid contestants and pointed out that no black competitor had ever made it to the finals. One columnist for Life magazine branded the contest “dull and pretentious and racist and exploitative and icky and sad.”34 But, for millions of people, Miss America still symbolized how young women were supposed to look and behave. As such, the event held in a declining resort town by the sea was an inviting target for a new kind of movement.

The protest was organized by New York Radical Women, a small group of friends with experience in civil rights and the larger New Left. Gradually, these women had grown disenchanted with the “macho” leadership of radical men who preferred their female comrades to stay in the background of what was supposed to be a common struggle. Remarkably, the Miss America protest was the first that any of the women involved had ever organized on her own. It also became a coming-out party for the feminist upsurge that, over the next decade, would change the lives of millions of women in the United States and around the world.

In spirit and ideology, the demonstrators owed a good deal to the New Left they were leaving. They chose the pageant because, in the words of organizer Robin Morgan, “Where else could one find such a perfect combination of American values—racism, materialism, capitalism—all packaged in one ‘ideal’ symbol, a woman.” Particularly egregious were the absence of black participants and the fact that recent winners flew off, with comedian Bob Hope, to entertain U.S. troops in Vietnam. Morgan described Miss Illinois,