

The 1968 Democratic National Convention

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“Democracy is in the streets,” was the cry of protestors at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The protestors, a mixture of young people, student activists, veterans, rabble-rousers and other assorted types were in Chicago for a purpose: to demonstrate their position against the United States’ involvement in Vietnam. Controversy arose when their protest turned violent; the Chicago police force began to suppress protestors through physical methods, clubbing them, beating them, restoring the so-called peace. The presence of the Youth International Party (YIPPIES), known for drug use, radicalism, and “theatrical” and obscene public appearances, was a legitimate threat to conservative Chicago, eliciting an overprotective response on the part of the police to suppress any potential violent outbreaks. While the behavior of the protestors was disrespectful and provocative, it did not attain the level of violence that would have been necessary to warrant the police response. Given the peaceable behavior of the majority of the protestors at the convention, the unrestricted police brutality against civilian protestors was not justified. The protest, meant to illuminate how U.S. involvement in Vietnam had made a “mockery of democracy,” was intended and designed to be non-violent; participants affiliated with Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) abstained from physical violence throughout the convention.¹ The stereotype of all activists as hippies and degenerates put the Chicago police on high alert, ready to strike preemptively without fully considering how or against whom, on an individual level, they were acting. Subsequent coverage of the convention by both the media and the Walker Commission Report served to vindicate protestors by laying blame on the Chicago authorities and police for the violence at the convention.

This paper was written for Nancy McPhaul’s Advanced Placement United States History class in the spring of 2009.

The New Student Way

“The goal written on the university walls was ‘Create two, three, many Columbias.’”

— Tom Hayden, Founder of SDS²

The 1960s provided the perfect mix of social rallying points to spawn a strong student movement. The war in Vietnam was a reality experienced by the youth of the day firsthand through the draft as well as through increasing media coverage. This was the generation who saw their friends and brothers sent to fight a war whose purpose few of them could adequately define, and they were outraged. Chants of, “Hey hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?” surrounded the White House, and organizations like SDS were born. Students for a Democratic Society, founded in 1962 at the University of Michigan by a group of students including soon-to-be-leader Tom Hayden, bonded over the wholehearted embracement of and belief in the ideals proffered by their Port Huron Statement. “We are people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit,” read one section of their manifesto.³ SDS, therefore, saw itself as the vanguard of idealistic yet politically focused middle class students campaigning for radical social changes that would eliminate the racism, sexism, and general bourgeois apathy to which they had grown disgustingly accustomed. Socialism seemed to be the ideal ideological fit for this envisioned society. SDS staged protests against the war in Vietnam, produced publications advocating civil rights (as they were closely related to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC), and staged protests against any form of U.S. involvement in situations that didn’t warrant it, thereby laying the groundwork throughout the early sixties for the 1968 Democratic National Convention.

Students for a Democratic Society was experiencing rapid growth on both social and political levels in the months preceding the convention (DNC). On a literal level, membership soared from 35,000 in April 1968 to more than 80,000 in November.⁴ Part of the reason for this jump was the Columbia Sit-In in the spring of 1968, which served to catalyze the shift in the model of protest used by SDS to bring about

social and political change. Students at Columbia University in New York City staged a protest against the school's relation to the Vietnam war (particularly war research), as well as against the university's plans to build a new gym in the Morningside Park district, a primarily African American neighborhood whose residents objected to the project. The campus protestors barricaded themselves inside Columbia buildings and took a dean hostage as a "political prisoner."⁵ This protest was of great importance not only because it brought various student groups together in a large-scale demonstration fueled by both foreign-policy and domestic concerns, but also because it showcased the power of student protests and served as inspiration for the protests at the Democratic Convention. The term "participatory democracy," a reference to the Port Huron Statement made in this context by then-SDS member Mark Rudd, was used to describe the Columbia movement; students were taking political action, demanding their view of equality through protests. Therefore, more so than filling out a ballot, they were taking "democracy" into their own hands. They were, in another phrase of the time, "taking it to the streets."

Radical Protestors and the Trial of the Chicago Seven

"Your Honor, I am glad to see Mr. Schultz finally concedes that things like levitating the Pentagon building, putting LSD in the water, 10,000 people walking nude on [in?] Lake Michigan, and a \$200,000 bribe attempt are all playing around."

— Leonard Wineglass, Defense Attorney for the Chicago Seven ⁶

The YIPPIES, who were known for their subversive ways, used language that gave conservatives reason to see them more as a threat to the peace of the convention than as a legitimate political organization. The opening section of the YIPPIE Manifesto read:

Come all you rebels, youth spirits, rock minstrels, bomb throwers, bank robbers, peacock freaks, toe worshippers, poets, street folk, liberated women, professors and body snatchers; it is election day and we are everywhere.⁷

The spectacle of YIPPIES openly advocating the congregation of "bomb throwers" and "bank robbers" was just cause for the city of

Chicago to worry about their imminent presence, especially with political figures present, and especially in the wake of the riots that had followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in April. However, the juxtaposition of these violent terms against a call for “peacock freaks” and “toe worshippers” gave their manifesto a comical air, something the YIPPIES were known for. The YIPPIES were not a violent organization; they were not the splinter-cell, militant Marxist-Leninist Weathermen. They were not American terrorists looking to force America into a proletarian uprising through the use of bombs or physical violence. When the humor and sarcasm in their manifesto was not understood, however, they acquired a threatening image more appropriate to the Weathermen.

The behavior of the YIPPIES was a shock for conservative Chicago, a city whose policemen had by and large joined the force out of a desire to protect conventional 1950s-era social values. Recollections from Vice President Hubert Humphrey about his interactions with radical protestors further serve to prove that these particular protestors deliberately set out to provoke a harsh response from the police: “It’s not very pleasant to...have people throw urine [and human excretia] on you...by people who say they believe in peace and brotherly love...I don’t consider that peace-making.”⁸ Humphrey certainly had a point. The police were there to protect the public, including the presidential candidates, from harm; having fecal matter thrown at a political figure constitutes harm. Therefore, the police were responding to a legitimate threat of assault towards a public figure; their response, in that sense, was justified. Humphrey also alluded to the YIPPIES making a mockery of the disciplined non-violence of SDS; they undermined the message of peace by acting as the “jokesters” of the activist bunch, and ended up being more detrimental than helpful to the cause of youth activism.

In the aftermath of the convention, eight men considered as the main instigators of the Chicago protests were charged with “intent to incite, organize, promote and encourage and... [speaking] to an assemblage of persons for the purpose of inciting, organizing, promoting and encouraging a riot, in violation of Title 18, United States Code, Section 2101,” and found guilty.⁹ What began as the trial of the Chicago Eight (Dave Dellinger, Rennie Davis, Tom Hayden, Abbie Hoffman, Jerry

Rubin, John Froines, Lee Weiner, and Bobby Seale) turned to a trial of only the first seven, as Seale ended up being tried separately and under more charges. Prosecution witnesses such as Chicago Police Chief Robert Murray testified to the violent and obscene measures the protestors employed to elicit a response from the police, including yelling vulgar abuse and throwing objects at the police, ranging from rocks to cigarette butts.¹⁰ This style of provocation fit with the reputation of the YIPPIES (of which Rubin and Hoffman were founders), and resulted in an initial guilty verdict. In 1972, however, the remaining five (Froines and Weiner had been found innocent in the first trial) of the Chicago Seven were found innocent on appeal of violating the Anti-Riot Act of 1968, and charges for both this and for contempt were dropped, dispelling the legal notion that the convention protestors had merited the police beating they received.¹¹

The Implications of Clubs and Communism

“You just can’t bury your head in the sand or get all touchy-feely when you’re a cop. That’s for the talking heads and the sops to cry over. And Christ, was there a lot of them. I think that we were realists and we did the job that most everyone wanted us to do even though they didn’t always want to admit it out loud.”

— Steve Nowakowski, Chicago Police¹²

The protest at the 1968 Democratic National Convention, meant to illuminate how U.S. involvement in Vietnam had made a “mockery of democracy,” was planned to be a non-violent protest by an organization of students; leaders and students involved in SDS abstained from physical violence throughout the protest.¹³ The Wednesday of the convention marked the highest point of tension between the police and the protestors. As the protestors prepared to march peacefully to the convention hall, Mayor Daley prepared a counter-attack, putting the National Guard on standby, ready to stop the protestors from making it to their mark by “any means necessary,” a sign of both preemptive and indiscriminate action on the part of Chicago authorities.¹⁴ The result was a bloody conflict. The police, a group of men who generally abhorred the New Left and hippie culture, saw a protestor tearing down an American flag, catalyzing the conflict

between the declaredly non-violent protestors on one side and fierce protectors of American society and values on the other, with the flag as the symbolic manifestation of those values. The desecration of the flag was therefore meant and understood as a declaration of war on both the physical and ideological levels; not only were the police fighting a potentially “dangerous” army of young people, they were fighting a manifestation of the threat of communism to their society. Ideological differences, however, do not justify the use of force against a protestor; after all, desecration of the flag is not against the law. Rennie Davis, one of the leaders of the protest and another declaredly non-violent leader, was beaten by the police in the act of trying to calm down protestors agitated by the harsh police response.¹⁵ Sixty people, a mix of protestors and non-affiliated convention attendees, were hospitalized with injuries from this police battle.¹⁶

To say that the “long-haired hippie freaks” and the conservative Chicago police force didn’t see eye-to-eye would be to put it mildly; however, their fundamental issues with each other stemmed from controversy over the same issue: communism. The concept of the United States’ failure to remain the “initiator of the United Nations” in spirit was a rallying point for the bourgeois members of SDS.¹⁷ Student organizations at the time did tend to focus on communism, with organizers like Tom Hayden quoting Mao and nearly all of them looking favorably on Marxist thought.¹⁸ The Port Huron Statement reflects a desire to achieve a society in which all men are equals, one in which the division of nations that causes a war like Vietnam doesn’t exist. As stated earlier, the police were ardently anti-communist, having mainly come of age during the height of the Red Scare in the 1950s.¹⁹

Their response, therefore, was not unanticipated; in January of 1968, Rennie Davis, along with Tom Hayden and Dave Dellinger (among others) met to discuss the inevitability of arrest at the convention, even if they practiced non-violence.²⁰ Their presentiment of the police attacks suggests the existence of a bias against the protestors, no matter what their actions. The fact that the police retaliated in such a violent manner against peaceable citizens exercising their first amendment rights to freedom of assembly and speech supports argument that

their response was unjustified. There was already a history of police intervention against student protests. During the Columbia Sit-In, 692 students were arrested, with more than 1000 police officers coming to disperse them.²¹ Another prior instance of police reaction to student protestors was the Yip-In at New York's Grand Central Station, also in the spring of 1968, where injuries ended up tallying to more than one hundred. Todd Gitlin, Berkeley professor of sociology and at the time an SDS member, points out that even New York Mayor John V. Lindsay declared the police to have used "excessive force" during the Yip-In.²² These previous instances of police brutality allowed Hayden and others to foreshadow their own fate. The New Left was repugnant to most American police, a clear and present subversive threat to law and order. In that sense the protestors arrived at the convention with the odds against them, and their taunts only served to incite an already hostile police force to the point of physical action.

The National Opinion

"Mayor Daley, a family man, welcomes you to a family town."

— Billboard in Chicago, August 1968²³

The Walker Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, written by attorney and eventual governor of Illinois Daniel Walker, was commissioned by President Lyndon B. Johnson to establish what had really happened between the police and the protestors at the Chicago convention. After taking the testimony of thousands of firsthand witnesses, participants, and police officers, the Walker Commission published its findings on December 1, 1968, stating that:

The nature of the response was unrestrained and indiscriminate police violence on many occasions, particularly at night. The violence was made all the more shocking by the fact that it was often inflicted upon persons who had broken no law, disobeyed no order, made no threat. These included peaceful demonstrators, onlookers, and large numbers of residents who were simply passing through, or happened to live in the areas where confrontations were occurring.²⁴

This commission report eschewed the notion that the provocation of the protestors was equal to the clubs wielded by the police force. And because the Report compiled firsthand testimony from such an array of witnesses, and because it was commissioned by the President and not the city of Chicago, the report was accepted as factual and thorough. The Walker Report therefore argues for a verdict of innocence for the protestors. The fact that so many spectators and passers-by were assaulted makes the violence described in the Walker Report all the more shocking for its indiscriminate nature. However, the document wasn't universally accepted, especially by the leaders of the protests. Tom Hayden later wrote that the report "covered up the real conspirators who gave the police their orders in Chicago: Daley, Humphrey, Johnson."²⁵ The "unbiased" nature of the report could therefore be called into question. The Chicago authorities were left blameless, unlike in such other accounts of the convention as John Schultz's *No One Was Killed*.²⁶ Even so, the report did serve to assuage some of the blame against the protestors.

"Mayor Daley was permitted to take over the media. Our own editorialists told us that we didn't really see what we saw under those blue helmets. The violent scenes of police crowd dispersal became 'riots,'" read one *New York Times* article from October 1968.²⁷ The men "under those blue helmets," the police, were protected by the Chicago authorities. This article seemed to corroborate the previously discussed pre-convention conspiracy theories of Hayden, Dellinger, and Davis. The initial media cover-up of police brutality lent weight to the notion that the Chicago city government, and Mayor Daley in particular, realized that something had gone wrong at the convention and that it would hurt their image if the true story of the trial got out. In the weeks following the convention, however, public opinion about the police response began to change. Donald Janson's article in the *New York Times*, exposing the media slant and attributing it to Daley, reached a mainstream audience who otherwise would not have likely known about the events of August in much detail. Janson maintained that the "hippies" were unfairly blamed for acts of vandalism committed by the police.²⁸ The mainstream media thus played a role in helping to expose the reality of the police actions at the convention by continuing to follow the story after the convention was over.

Looking Forward

“The ’60s are gone, dope will never be as cheap, sex never as free, and the rock and roll never as great.”

— Abbie Hoffman

Spanning the course of the Chicago convention, protestors shouted abuse at the police, and the police responded by giving vent to their own pent-up aggression towards a changing society personified by the “long-haired hippies.” While the protestors did end up successful in the sense that they were ultimately not found guilty of inciting a riot, the convention did result in the deterioration of the structure and legitimacy of SDS. Following the convention the group fragmented, with the militant Weathermen breaking away, a split that had been foreshadowed at the time of leader Mark Rudd’s instrumental role at Columbia. Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman are both dead. Tom Hayden has been active in California state politics, and Dave Dellinger continued to protest, even getting arrested at the age of eighty-three.²⁹ While their respective organizations may have ended in relative failure, the idealism represented by the youth activism of groups like SDS are what have enabled the degree of student activism visible in the United States today. In fact, SDS is beginning to show up on college campuses nationwide once again. Perhaps the world is a stage for student protest once again; the whole world might soon be watching. ●

Notes

1. James Miller, *Democracy Is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 284.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Tom Hayden, “The Port Huron Statement,” in *Takin’ It To The Streets*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 51.
4. David Barber, *A Hard Rain Fell: SDS and Why It Failed* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 5.
5. Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 306-307; Miller, 290-292.

6. *United States of America vs. David T. Dellinger, Rennard C. Davis, Thomas E. Hayden, Abbott H. Hoffman, Jerry C. Rubin, Lee Weiner, John R. Froines, and Bobby G. Seale*, 69CRI80 (Ill. 1969).
7. Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, "YIPPIE Manifesto," in Bloom and Breines (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 278.
8. Charles Kaiser, *1968 in America: Music, Politics, Chaos, Counterculture, and the Shaping of a Generation* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 247.
9. *United States of America vs. David T. Dellinger, Rennard C. Davis, Thomas E. Hayden, Abbott H. Hoffman, Jerry C. Rubin, Lee Weiner, John R. Froines and Bobby G. Seale*, 69CRI80 (Ill. 1970).
10. Ibid.
11. Douglas O. Linder, "The Chicago Seven Trial: A Chronology," The Chicago Seven Trial, <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/Chicago7/chronology.html> (accessed February 27, 2009).
12. Frank Kusch, *Battleground Chicago: The Police and the 1968 Democratic National Convention* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 14.
13. Miller, 284.
14. Mark Hamilton Lytle, *America's Uncivil Wars: The Sixties Era From Elvis to the Fall of Richard Nixon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 261.
15. Lytle, 261.
16. "Convention was Dissidents' 'D-Day,'" *Chicago Tribune*, September 7, 1968.
17. Hayden, 51; Barber, 54-55.
18. Kaiser, 230.
19. Kusch, 13.
20. David Farber, *Chicago '68* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 80.
21. Gitlin, 307-308.

22. Ibid.
23. Kaiser, 230.
24. Daniel Walker, "The Walker Commission," in Bloom and Breines (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 370.
25. Michael R. Belknap, *American Political Trials* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994), 250
26. Gitlin, 326.
27. Donald Janson, "Newsmen Assail Chicago Papers," *New York Times*, October 13, 1968, <http://www.nytimes.com> (accessed February 26, 2009).
28. Ibid.
29. Linder, "The Chicago Seven Trial."

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