THE TUMULTUOUS SIXTIES

SECONDARY SOURCE

MAURICE ISSERMAN AND MICHAEL KAZIN,
“THE FAILURE AND SUCCESS OF THE NEW RADICALISM”

Americans remain divided in their assessments of the Sixties. Some consider the era a time of idealism and achievement; others a time of moral decline and anarchy. It is, however, indisputable that the 1960s reshaped American politics and society. In this essay written at the end of the Reagan years, Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, both noted political historians, examine the contested legacy of the New Left.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. What were the origins of the New Left? What were the original goals of SDS? How and why did SDS change over time?
2. What were some of the factors that made many young people receptive to political radicalism in the 1960s?
3. In their conclusion, Isserman and Kazin write, “The contradictory legacy of the sixties…provides evidence of both the failures and successes of the new radicalism—“failures” that were sometimes unavoidable, and sometimes self-inflicted, and “successes” that were usually unrecognized and were often the opposite of what was intended.” What do they mean?
4. What are some ways that liberals and conservatives have continued to debate the legacies of the sixties since this article was written in 1989?
5. Prior to completing this chapter, what were your views of the sixties? Explain how these readings have modified those views. Do you think that the sixties changed America for better or worse? Why?

As easy it was to tell black from white
It was all that easy to tell wrong from right
And our choices were few and the thought never hit
That the one road we travelled would ever shatter and split.

—“Bob Dylan’s Dream,” from The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan

So wrote Bob Dylan, not yet twenty-two years old, in what was in 1963 a prophetic—or at least prematurely nostalgic—elegy for the illusions of youthful commitment. Shatter and split the new radicalism certainly did, in the space of only a decade and in a way that left many of its adherents embittered and its historical reputation in tatters. After Ronald Reagan’s two victories at the polls, the sixties, viewed at the time as the beginning of a new era of
reform, seem instead a short interregnum amid the larger rightward shift in American politics that began during Franklin Roosevelt’s troubled second term and continued through the 1980s. What difference, if any, did the decade of cultural and political upheaval encapsulated by the rise and fall of the New Left make?

Though the origins of the New Left can be traced back at least to the mid-1950s, radicalism only began to reemerge as a significant undercurrent on American campuses in 1960 when a heretofore obscure group called the Student League for Industrial Democracy (SLID) renamed itself Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Under the leadership of two recent University of Michigan graduates, Al Haber and Tom Hayden, SDS became a small but increasingly influential network of campus activists. At its official founding convention, held in Port Huron, Michigan, in 1962, SDS adopted a manifesto declaring that the ideas and organizational forms familiar to earlier generations of Marxian radicals were outmoded. The “Port Huron Statement” dedicated SDS to the achievement of “participatory democracy” inside its own movement and within the larger society. Initially engaged on a wide variety of fronts, from civil rights to nuclear disarmament to university reform, by the mid-1960s, many SDS founders had left the campuses to concentrate on community organizing in the slums of northern cities. Ironically, just as SDS leaders began to forsake the campus, the Berkeley Free Speech Movement in the fall of 1964 and the Vietnam teach-in movement in the spring of 1965 signaled the growing responsiveness of college students to radical ideas.

The steady escalation of the war in Vietnam from the spring of 1965 up to the spring of 1968 spurred the growth of both a broadly based antiwar movement and of the campus New Left, and led the latter to adopt increasingly militant rhetoric and tactics. By the fall of 1967 the New Left had moved “from dissent to resistance.” Teach-ins and silent vigils gave way to the seizure of campus buildings and disruptive street demonstrations. Under new and younger leadership SDS continued to grow, and eventually some of its original leaders, like Tom Hayden and Rennie Davis, were attracted back to antiwar organizing from the slums of Newark and Chicago.

In the aftermath of the bloody confrontations at the Chicago Democratic convention in the summer of 1968, and the indictment of Hayden, Davis, and six others for “conspiracy,” most New Leftists abandoned whatever hopes they still cherished of reforming the existing political system. Declaring themselves allies and disciples of third-world Communist revolutionaries like Mao Zedong and Che Guevara, SDS leaders now conceived their principal role as one of “bringing the war home” to the “imperialist mother country.” In 1969, SDS collapsed as small, self-proclaimed revolutionary vanguards squabbled over control of the organization, but the ranks of student radicals continued to increase through the 1969-70 school year. Polls showed that as many as three quarters of a million students identified themselves as adherents of the New Left. The national student strike that SDSers had long dreamed of but had never been able to pull off became a reality in the spring of 1970. Spontaneously organized in response to the invasion of Cambodia and the killing of four students at Kent State University, it effectively paralyzed the nation’s university system.¹

The American writer John Dos Passos, describing the revolutionary exaltation and illusion of 1919 in his novel, Three Soldiers, declared: “Any spring is a time of overturn, but then Lenin was alive, the Seattle general strike had

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The epigraph from “Bob Dylan’s Dream” © 1963 Warner Bros. Inc. and a portion of “Blowin’ in the Wind” on p. 221, © 1962 Warner Bros. Inc., are used by permission. All rights reserved.

seemed the beginning of the flood instead of the beginning of the ebb.” It soon became apparent to despairing New Leftists that the spring of 1970 marked a similar “beginning of the ebb.” Former SDS president Carl Oglesby was one among many who took to the hills (literally, in his case) at the start of the new decade. As Oglesby would say in a bittersweet reflection years later: “There were a lot of good, righteous people showing up in places like Vermont and New Hampshire in those days. Lots of parties, great reefer, good acid. Lovely friends…I remember it with great fondness. It was almost the best part of the struggle. The best part of the struggle was the surrender.”

When the sixties were over, it seemed to many former activists that they had accomplished nothing. The “participatory democracy” the New Left sought in its early years remained a utopian dream; the “revolutionary youth movement” it built in its waning years had collapsed; the tiny “new communist parties” that one-time New Leftists tried to organize in the 1970s only illustrated once again the wisdom of Marx’s comments in The Eighteenth Brumaire on the way history repeated turns tragedy into farce.

Yet in surveying the ruins of these successive political failures, it is striking that while “nothing” was accomplished by the New Left in its short life, everything was different afterward. If the years that followed the 1960s did not live up to the hopeful vision of the future sketched out in the Port Huron Statement, still they did not mark a return to the previous status quo. America certainly became a more politically and culturally contentious society because of what happened in the 1960s—and in some respects it also became a more just, open, and egalitarian one. On the coldest, darkest, and most reactionary days of the Reagan ascendancy, there was more radical belief and activity to be seen in the United States than was present anytime in the 1950s. As an organizational presence the New Left had vanished, but as a force in American political culture its impact continued to be felt.

The New Left was shaped by and came to embody a profound dislocation in American culture, and, in the end, it had more impact on the ideas that Americans had about themselves and their society than on structures of power that governed their lives. Young radicals articulated a critique of “everyday life” in the United States, which was, in time, taken up by millions of people who had little notion of where those ideas originated. In the course of the sixties and seventies, many Americans came to recognize and reject the prevalence of racial and sexual discrimination, to ask new questions about the legitimacy of established institutions and authority, and to oppose military adventures abroad. To understand the New Left’s role in this transition, historians need both to explore the organizational dynamics of radical groups like SDS and to analyze the ways in which American culture shaped the young radicals who emerged to challenge the received wisdom of their society.

II

The late 1980s saw a revival of interest in both the ephemera and the history of the 1960s. Tie-dyed shirts, peace symbols, Beatles music, and one-time Yippie leader Abbie Hoffman all resurfaced on college campuses. Many students, while knowing little about the politics of the New Left, admired sixties protesters for being, as the credulous young character in a “Doonesbury” cartoon put it, “larger than life, bonded and driven by commitment, putting their lives on the line for a great cause.”

Popular interest in and memories of the New Left often seem preoccupied with celebrities, fashion, and lifestyle. The most accessible sources of information available on the sixties to young people in the eighties—“classic rock” radio shows and Hollywood movies—were hardly designed to facilitate serious historical inquiry. In the 1983 film The Big Chill, director Lawrence Kasdan offered a vision of the sixties as a time of embarrassing idealism that

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produced enough good songs to fill out a sound track but otherwise bequeathed nothing of continuing relevance. The film depicted a group of supposed New Left veterans who gather to mourn the passing of one of their own. Although a brief reference is made to one of the characters having been seriously wounded in Vietnam, no one in the film seems at all interested in reflecting on the war or any of the other causes that moved them in their youth, let alone in making connections between their former beliefs and the world around them in the 1980s. Not once in a long, emotional weekend do any of them abandon their self-absorption long enough to mention the words “Ronald Reagan,” “nuclear war,” or “Central America.”

_The Big Chill_ did, however, contain a kernel of truth. “Politics,” as conventionally defined, was only of secondary importance in the rise of the new radicalism of the 1960s. The emergence and celebration of generationally defined life-styles preceded the appearance of the New Left and, for most Americans throughout the 1960s, continued to overshadow the fate of organizations, candidates, and causes. As contemporary observers and historians have since agreed, the phenomenon of the “baby boom” determined the contours of the sixties’ dizzying pace of change. Between 1945 and 1946, the birth rate in the United States leaped 20 percent. Thereafter, it continued to climb, peaking in 1957 when over four million babies were born in a single year. The impact of this unexpected development, which reversed a century-long decline in the birth rate, had effects everywhere—from the spread of suburbia to the transformation of the university system. At each stage of its life, the baby-boom generation has proven to be a voracious consumer of material goods, from diapers and cribs to microwave ovens and video cassette recorders. It has also shown an enormous capacity to absorb new forms of entertainment, new images, and new ideas about politics and society.

Starting with the Davy Crockett fad of the early 1950s, cultural entrepreneurs seeking to tap the disposable income controlled by the nation’s young perfected their pitch and inadvertently helped shape a distinctive generational consciousness. Hollywood soon learned to gear its offerings to the tastes of the new generation. While ostensibly condemning juvenile delinquency, such movies as _The Wild One_ and _Rebel without a Cause_ in effect established actors like Marlon Brando and James Dean as icons of youthful rebellion. Elvis Presley’s fusion of country music and rhythm and blues combined with the frank sensuality of his stage presence signaled the arrival of a new musical era; major record producers were quick to take note and seek imitators. To a far greater extent than their parents, baby boomers grew up surrounded by and at home in a world of mass culture and mass consumption. And it was precisely because they were so deeply imbued with the promise and assumptions of that world—believing the advertisers who told them that a time of unending affluence and total freedom of choice was at hand—that they were willing, at least for a few years, to forego the quest for economic security and its material tokens that obsessed the older generation. The purveyors of mass culture were thus unintentionally acting as the gravediggers of a depression-inspired and cold war-reinforced conservative cultural consensus.

As a college education became the norm rather than a privilege, millions of young people found themselves in a new socially determined developmental stage that extended adolescence into the middle twenties or even later. By the early 1960s, “youth communities” had sprung up on the outskirts of college campuses, often in the cheap housing available on the edge of black ghettos. There, surrounded by their peers, largely freed from adult supervision and spared for the time being the responsibilities of career, family, and mortgage, young people began to experiment with new manners, mores, stimulants, sexual behavior, and, in due time, forms of political expression. “Beat” poets, artists, jazz musicians, and folksingers, though less commercially exploitable than Presley and his imitators, soon carved out their own niche on the margins of college communities as well as in such urban enclaves as New York’s Greenwich Village and North Beach in San Francisco. Jack Kerouac’s novel _On the Road_, a freeform chronicle of cultural alienation, became a best-seller when it appeared in 1957 and has never been out of print. Kerouac’s protagonist, though displaying no discernible political sympathies, was thoroughly disenchanted with mainstream American values and sought refuge among and enlightenment from America’s dispossessed and despised classes—tramps, winos, migrant farm laborers, black musicians. Norman Mailer’s controversial essay “The White Negro,” also published in 1957, celebrated white hipsters who “drifted out at night looking for action with a

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6 Todd Gitlin commented on the absence of all political references in _The Big Chill_ in a 1984 interview with one of the authors.
black man’s code to fit their facts.” Mailer predicted that “a time of violence, new hysteria, confusion and rebellion” would soon come along to “replace the time of conformity.” The roots of the coming counterculture could be seen in the growing tendency among young whites to view black culture as a vibrant, sexually and emotionally honest alternative to what was regarded as the hypocrisy of the dominant culture. As Mailer noted, “in this wedding of the white and the black it was the Negro who brought the cultural dowry.”

At precisely the moment when the first wave of the baby boom reached the college campuses, the southern civil rights movement exploded into newspaper headlines and the nation’s consciousness through the use of an innovative strategy of mass, nonviolent civil disobedience. The 1960 southern sit-in movement, which attracted fifty thousand participants in the space of a few months, was sparked by four black college freshmen in Greensboro, North Carolina, who decided on their own to challenge the segregation of a Woolworth’s lunch counter. Rennie Davis, a founder of SDS who was a sophomore at Oberlin College in 1960, recalled: “Here were four students from Greensboro who were suddenly all over Life magazine. There was a feeling that they were us and we were them, and a recognition that they were expressing something we were feeling as well and they’d won the attention of the country.”

For sympathetic college students, the civil rights movement blended the appeal of “making history” with the potential for testing one’s own sense of personal “authenticity” through an existential (and for those who joined the freedom rides or the voter registration campaigns in the South, quite genuine) brush with danger. In her book Personal Politics, historian Sara Evans described the compelling example set by the young black volunteers of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee: “Eating, sleeping, working side by side day after day, SNCC activists created a way of life more than a set of ideas.” Thus, in the early 1960s, the sort of quixotic identification with outcasts and outsiders offered by On the Road and “The White Negro” acquired it compelling moral and political relevance. A new style of bohemianism that embodied a cultural stance derived from the Beats, and a political critique inspired by the black freedom movement attracted a growing following among college-age white Americans.

The superheated ideological atmosphere of 1950s cold war America played an important role in shaping the political outlook of college students at the start of the new decade. They had grown up in a political culture that stressed the division of the world into absolute good and absolute evil, freedom versus totalitarianism. The cold war was justified in much the same terms that had been used in the recent victorious struggle against the Axis powers. Yet, beneath the surface agreement among conservatives and liberals on the need to contain the Soviet threat, certain ambiguities still lurked. For many Americans, the cold war summoned up all uncritical identification with the emerging national security state. But some others, loyal to the liberatory and antiracist beliefs that had fueled the war against fascism, tendered their support for the “free world” on a more conditional basis.

Consider the wide appeal that the classic World War II film Casablanca developed on college campuses by the early 1960s. Casablanca portrayed America as a redemptive force in a world too long dominated by brutal and amoral power relations, a beacon of light to refugees who had fled Nazi-occupied Europe and impatiently awaited the “plane to Lisbon” (and thence to New York). In the course of the film, Humphrey Bogart’s character, salonkeeper Rick Blaine, discards his cynical go-it-alone veneer to reveal his romantic idealism. Victor Laszlo, the European resistance leader, challenges Rick to recognize that “each of us has a destiny, for good or for evil.” Rick responds by choosing to fight the good war (as would the United States days later, the film being set in early December 1941). But suppose the United States had chosen to back the likes of the sinister Nazi leader, Major Strasser, rather than Victor Laszlo? What would Rick’s choice have been then? His conduct was the product of


11 Evans, Personal Politics, 42.
individual moral choice rather than unwavering patriotic allegiance—and what was freely given could, by implication, be just as freely withheld or withdrawn.\textsuperscript{12}

World War II also taught a lesson about the unspeakable horrors that could be committed by an advanced bureaucratic state that had lost its moral bearings. The Israeli capture and trial of former SS Obersturmbannführer Adolf Eichmann in 1960-61 revived memories of the postwar Nuremberg trials; while Hannah Arendt’s 1963 book \textit{Eichmann in Jerusalem} made the “banality of evil” a commonplace of educated liberal discourse. Arendt argued that European Jews were the victims of a monstrous system that depended on the acquiescence of ordinary human beings. Eichmann had served so efficiently as a cog in the Nazi death machine not out of personal depravity or exceptional sadism but, because of a lack of imagination: he proved incapable of comprehending the evil of his own actions. Among the conclusions Arendt drew from her meditation on the “banality of evil” was a surprisingly optimistic one. She no longer contended that totalitarianism was capable of stamping out every vestige of independent thought and resistance among its subject populations: “Under conditions of terror most people will comply but some people will not…. No more is required, and no more can reasonably be asked, for this planet to remain a place fit for human habitation.”\textsuperscript{13}

Norman Mailer in his 1957 essay “The White Negro” had already begun to refer to American society as “totalitarian”; in the decade that followed, a lot of loose talk would be heard on the Left comparing Nazi Germany and the United States. But one need not have subscribed to such misleading analogies to be drawn to the moral imagery and lessons provided by the Nuremberg trials. In fact, if resisters to evil could be found even under the extreme conditions of Nazi oppression, could less be expected of those who enjoyed the protections of liberal democracy? Joan Libby, a Mount Holyoke College student and antiwar activist in the mid-1960s, became an organizer for the National Moratorium Committee in 1969. Her parents disapproved of her antiwar activities, and she found herself relying on the Nuremberg analogy in her arguments with them:

Both my parents were Jewish, and one of the things I had had to learn about, of course, was the Holocaust, and one of the lessons in that always is that you shouldn’t stand by and think somebody else is going to do it. That’s a serious lesson, I think, for susceptible young people like myself—a powerful one. It becomes sort of an imperative. There’s always a double-edged sword when you bring people up with the notion that you should take [moral] positions on things. You never know where they’ll come out.\textsuperscript{14}

In 1961, John F. Kennedy had sounded the call for a selfless dedication to the (vaguely defined) national cause, significantly posed in terms of individual choice: “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” The same spirit of self-sacrificing idealism that led many students to volunteer for the Peace Corps led others to the civil rights movement. Many young white volunteers felt that their civil rights activism was sanctioned from on high (although SNCC’s black field workers never shared that particular illusion, knowing how unresponsive the Justice Department was to their requests for protection against racist attacks). A succession of emotional and political blows followed, with the cumulative effect of redirecting the spirit of idealism away from the official agenda being set in Washington: there was fear of nuclear annihilation during the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962, indignation over the brutal treatment of civil rights demonstrators in Birmingham in the spring of 1963, shock at Kennedy’s assassination that fall, distrust the following summer as a result of the Democratic convention’s “compromise” that prevented the seating of Fannie Lou Hamer and other black delegates from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and dismay over the escalation of the war in Vietnam in the spring of 1965.

In the early-to-mid 1960s, an essential prop of the old order gave way in the minds of tens of thousands of young people. In more jaded times, like those which followed the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, disbelief in the official pronouncements of American foreign-policy makers would lead primarily to cynicism and apathy; but, in the 1960s, when the fervor of cold war liberalism was still a potent force, such disillusionment was often the prelude to an intensely moralistic conversion to political activism.

Bob Dylan’s rapid rise to fame was emblematic of the newly emerging cultural and political sensibility. Dylan’s first album, a combination of folk and blues interpretations and his own ironic ballads, was released in February 1962. It sold an unremarkable five thousand copies in its first year. But Dylan’s second album, released in May of

\textsuperscript{12} Rick Blaine’s service in the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War is also alluded to in the film. Although the full political significance of that detail was probably better understood by audiences in 1943 than in the 1960s, it is clear that Rick is not solely or even primarily concerned with his own country’s battles.


\textsuperscript{14} Quoted in Morrison and Morrison, \textit{From Camelot to Kent State}, 138.
1963, found a broad new audience. *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan*, which featured protest songs like “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “Masters of War,” and “A Hard Rain’s A Gonna Fall,” sold 200,000 copies by July 1963. The following month, Peter, Paul and Mary released a single of Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind” that sold over 300,000 copies in less than two weeks, making it the first protest song ever to grace the hit parade.15

Where were Dylan’s new fans coming from, and what message did they seek in his music? “Blowin’ in the Wind” was simultaneously a song about coming-of-age (“How many roads must a man walk down / Before you call him a man?”) and about moral choice (“Yes, ‘n’ how many times can a man turn his head / Pretending he just doesn’t see?”), as well as a promise that those who understood its message would soon help redeem the nation (“The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind / The answer is blowin’ in the wind”).16 Young Americans in the 1960s were not the first generation to feel that they were more sensitive to hypocrisy and injustice than their elders. But due to the structural and ideological framework that had emerged in postwar America, they were primed for an opening to the Left in the early 1960s. The demographic bulge, the delayed entry into the adult world, the encouragement of generational consciousness by advertisers, the cultural identification with outsiders and marginal groups, the inspirational example of the civil rights movement, and the paradoxical influence of cold war liberalism were the raw materials from which a mass New Left would be fashioned over the next few years.

III

The chief organizational beneficiary of these trends would be SDS. As the war and the protests it inspired escalated in the mid-1960s, SDS grew rapidly. This occurred despite the fact that, after organizing the first antiwar march on Washington in April 1965, its leaders disdained sponsorship of any more such events because they did not address the root issue of an imperialist foreign policy—“stopping the seventh Vietnam from now,” as one slogan put it.17 But the policies SDS leaders chose to embrace or reject had little to do with the organization’s growth. As Steve Max, an early leader of the group, recalled in a recent interview: “The progression in SDS was to be more and more movement and less and less organization. It was a situation of a movement looking for a place to happen.”18

There were national headlines in the spring of 1965 when SDS’s antiwar march attracted some twenty thousand participants. By the end of that school year, the SDS National Office (NO) was receiving a flood of letters from individuals and groups eager to affiliate, from places like Dodge City Community College in Kansas not previously known as loci of radical activity. It was no longer necessary for SDS to organize chapters: they organized themselves.19 Many recruits were members of preexisting local groups who sought access to the resources and prestige that only a national organization could provide.

A typical communication arrived at the NO in November 1965 from a student at Ventura College (near Los Angeles) inquiring about the possibility of affiliating his local “Free Students for America” (FSFA) with SDS:

> What I have read and heard of your group leads me to believe we think much in the same direction. The basic aims of the F.S.F.A. 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.

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.” The NO’s response was favorable, including only the proviso that if the “Free Students” became an official SDS chapter they would have to agree to admit nonpacifists.20


18 Interview with Steve Max, May 14, 1986.

19 Breines, *Community and Organization*, 70. For the formation of Dodge City Community College SDS, see letter from Bill Burrows to NO, January 11, 1965, Reel 21, SDS Papers (microfilm of holdings in Wisconsin State Historical Society collection).

20 Letter from Timothy Tyndall to NO, November 23, 1965, Reel 21, SDS Papers.
The NO set up a system of campus “travelers” and regional offices, but these did little more than service existing chapters, distribute literature, and make an occasional statement to the media. New members were seldom “converted” to SDS ideology. If the SDS “old guard” had had its way, the organization would have functioned chiefly as a recruiting pool for future community organizers. Instead, reflecting the loosely formulated set of ideas, concerns, and political priorities that new members brought with them into the national organization, SDS chapters increasingly focused their efforts on resisting the war in Vietnam. Students did not become activists because they joined SDS; they joined SDS because they were already activists.

The SDS annual national conventions were important mainly as places where SDSers from around the country could make contacts and share experiences. Labored efforts to chart a coordinated national strategy (like an abortive “Ten Days to Shake the Empire” plan in 1968) were almost universally ignored by local chapters. To the extent that people in SDS chapters learned to speak a common language and pursue a common political agenda, they did so through a process of osmosis rather than central direction.

Just at the moment when it began to develop a significant national presence, SDS lost the ability to set its own agenda. Starting in 1965, SDS’s concerns and the pace of its development were largely reactions to decisions being made in the White House and the Pentagon. The escalation of the Vietnam War thus simultaneously strengthened and weakened SDS. In the matter of a few months, it transformed the group from a small network of activists, most of whom knew one another, into a national movement with hundreds of chapters—and an organizational infrastructure that never managed to make the transition. And while the war galvanized protesters, it also bred frustration and extremism in their ranks. Vietnam was a particularly volatile issue around which to build a mass movement. No partial victories or breathing spaces could be won: the movement would either force the government to end the war, or it would fail. As a result the peace movement, with the New Left at its core, constantly swung back and forth between near-millennial expectations and dark and angry despair.

As the political climate changed after 1965, so did the New Left’s cultural style. The new members who flooded into SDS (clubbed the “prairie power” contingent because so many of them came from places other than the usual urban 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 the new cultural currents running through college towns.

In January 1966, three members of the newly organized SDS chapter at the University of Oklahoma were among those arrested in a marijuana raid on a private party in Norman. Newspapers throughout the country picked up the story, linking SDS with pot-smoking. The Norman police chief unabashedly revealed to local reporters that his suspicions of the students had been aroused by their politics as much as their alleged drug use: “Several of these people have been active in the Society [SDS]... One of them had a receipt showing he had just joined the SDS.” High bail was set for all the defendants, and two of there were locked up incommunicado in a state mental hospital for observation because of their long hair.

Jeff Shero, an SDS campus traveler and leading exponent of “prairie power” within the organization, visited Norman soon after the bust. He reported back to the NO that the police had assembled prescription drugs and antiwar literature for sensationalized photographs. Local newspapers reported that a book on “homosexuality” was found in the raided apartment. They neglected to mention the name of the book’s author—Sigmund Freud. Shero was both indignant and amused at the crudity of the official antics, but he concluded that the affair had not done SDS any real political harm. “The chapter probably isn’t irreparably damaged,” he wrote to the NO. “Chapter people were mixed as to the effect of the raid, some actually thought it would be beneficial.”

Steve Max and a few other “old guard” leaders of SDS had a different reaction. Speaking in a tone that reflected the assumptions of his earlier involvement with the Communist youth movement, Max regarded it a matter of

21 For example, in December 1965, a student affiliated with a high school antiwar group in Sanger, California, wrote to the NO: “Gentlemen, Our chief concern is the war in Vietnam and we have been circulating leaflets and petitions protesting our government’s actions there. However, we are experiencing difficulties. We lack material to print and distribute. Could you please remedy this situation” (Rick Lehman to NO, December 7, 1965, Reel 21, SDS Papers).

22 “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” (Thomas Powers, Vietnam: The War at Home [ 1973; reprint, Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984], 200).


25 Letter from Jeff Shero to National Administrative Committee (NAC), January 19, 1966, Reel 20, SDS Papers.
“Socialist discipline” that “unless the organization votes to carry on a Legalize marijuana through a civil disobedience campaign, then our members ought not place themselves and the organization in a position where they can be put out of commission so easily.” He wanted the Norman chapter suspended until it had, through some unspecified procedure, reformed itself. In a subsequent letter, he reiterated, “If we don’t start to draw the line somewhere we are going to wind up with a federation of dope rings instead of a national political organization.”

But sentiment in the hinterland seemed to run in a completely opposite direction. One member from Ohio reported to the NO that news of the Norman arrests “struck home in the Ohio area since a number of people including three friends have been arrested on charges involving pot.” Although he realized that SDS might have good reasons to avoid involvement in a campaign to legalize pot-smoking, “nevertheless, I think this area is another expression of the lack of individual freedom in the society for an individual desiring to control his own life without interference.”

The Norman SDS chapter was not suspended. Moreover, within a few years, SDS would not simply regard the use of drugs as a question of individual choice but would endorse it as yet another emblem of the revolutionary disaffection of the young. “Our whole life is a defiance of Amerika,” the newspaper of the Weatherman SDS faction exulted in 1969. “It’s moving in the streets, digging sounds, smoking dope…fighting pigs.” By the late sixties, marijuana and LSD were circulating freely at national SDS conventions.

Underlying the ability and willingness of so many young radicals, along with others of their generation, to experiment with new “lifestyles” (including drugs) was the economic prosperity of the postwar era. New Leftists took affluence for granted and despised its corrupting influence, unlike the Socialists and Communists of the 1930s who denounced capitalism for its inability to provide the minimum decencies of life to the poor. The great revolutionary drama of the New York theater in the 1930s had been Clifford Odets’s “Waiting for Lefty,” which ended with the “workers” in the cast and the audience joining together in chanting “Strike, strike, strike!”

Perhaps the closest equivalent to Odets’s work in the 1960s was the popular play by Peter Brooks, The Persecution and Assassination of Jean Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade (or, as it was more commonly known, Marat/Sade), which suggested that conventional politics, even conventional revolutionary politics, was exhausted as a force for change. The final scene in Marat/Sade provoked the same kind of audience empathy as the climax of Waiting for Lefty, although this time the identification was not with striking workers but with rioting lunatics in an insane asylum, who sang “We want a revolution…NOW!” The song went on to become a kind of unofficial anthem of the Columbia strike in the spring of 1968.

Julian Beck’s “Living Theater,” which toured campuses during the late 1960s, went a step further than Marat/Sade by dispensing with scripts altogether. In a typical Living Theater production, the “actors” challenged the audience to join them on stage in disrobing, smoking marijuana, and milling around in it kind of pseudo-liberated confusion. A student who participated in a building seizure at the University of Chicago in 1969 saw a direct link between the decision by the local SDS chapter to take over the building and a visit shortly before by the Living Theater:

The idea was to liberate yourself from the confining conventions of life, and to celebrate the irrational side of your nature, kind of let yourself go…. At a place like the University of Chicago, this was really the opposite of every message that you’d been getting from the moment you stepped into the place…. This was the counterculture coming to us, and it stirred people up and made us feel like doing something dramatic.

Earlier generations of radicals had derided capitalism as an anarchic, irrational system; the new radicals scorned the system because it was too rational, based on a soul-destroying set of technological and bureaucratic imperatives that stifled individual expression. From university reform, where the slogan was “I am a human being, do not fold,
spindle or mutilate,” to draft resistance, where the buttons read “Not with my life, you don’t,” the New Left championed a form of radical individualism that was authentically American in derivation and flavor—ironically, all too “American” for the organizational well-being of the movement. For this deeply rooted individualism prepared the way for the development of a movement cult of “confrontation.”

In the Communist, Socialist, and Trotskyist movements of the 1930s, young radicals had prided themselves on their analytic abilities, their skill in debate, their command of the intricacies of Marxist theory. In contrast, a kind of emotional and moral plain-speaking was the preferred rhetorical style among SDS leaders. Authenticity, usually described as “commitment,” was the political and personal value New Leftists were most eager to display, a quality that could best be established by the willingness to “put your body on the line.” Overcoming any lingering squeamishness about breaking the law (and plate-glass windows) was the ultimate “gut-check” that alone could establish whether you were “part of the problem or part of the solution.”

The political deficiencies of this personal stance were not lost on some SDSers though they found themselves powerless to correct the situation. As early as 1965, Lee Webb, former SDS national secretary, complained in an internal document 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.”

Late sixties SDS rhetoric, composed of equal parts Maoist jargon and black street rap, communicated little but the angry alienation of its practitioners. Nevertheless, it had a very potent appeal to the already-converted or would-be recruits in defining the cultural terrain of the movement—if you spoke the language, you were already a revolutionary. “Brothers,” a high school student wrote to the NO in the late 1960s, “I sympathize with the movement and its goals. But information on what’s going on is hard to come by in rural, conservative western Pennsylvania. Dig?”

By the late 1960s, SDS had grown to as many as a hundred thousand loosely affiliated members, while tens of thousands more could be counted as supporters of the movement. But off-campus, the New Left’s activities, and the increasingly outrageous and opaque language in which they were justified, found few supporters. Ronald Reagan spoke for many Americans when he declared in the midst of the People’s Park disorders in Berkeley in 1969 (which left one spectator dead from police buckshot), “If it’s a blood bath they want, let it be now.”

The ferocity with which authorities sought to crack down on campus protest, only exacerbated the appeal of extreme rhetoric and doctrines within SDS. In the summer of 1969 the organization splintered, with one small faction led by the Progressive Labor Party (PLP) heading for the factories, and another small faction led by Weatherman heading for the “underground.” Neither the PLP nor Weatherman enlisted more than a tiny fraction of SDS members under their banners, but Weatherman’s cultural style—which included a fervent if erratic promotion of drugs, sex, and rock and roll—gave it a measure of influence on campuses that the dour dogmatists in the PLP were never able to match. In the early 1970s underground newspapers gave extensive coverage to Weatherman’s bombings and “communiqués”: posters in college dorms invited Bernardine Dohrn and other Weatherman fugitives to seek shelter.

IV

The demise of SDS did not retard the flowering of cultural radicalism. From campus towns to the “youth ghettos” of big cities and even to American military bases in Vietnam, a diffuse set of “countercultural” ideas, symbols, and behaviors circulated. “Liberation” was easy to achieve, since it was defined as the practice of a communal, playful, and sensual life-style. While they often ignored or explicitly rejected the politics advocated by “power-tripping” radicals, those immersed in the counterculture embraced beliefs the earlier New Left had first popularized. Alternative, participatory communities based on decentralized, small-scale technology and an ethic of loving mutuality had all been prefigured by the Port Huron Statement, the civil rights movement, and SDS’s community-organizing projects. Garbed in apolitical dress, this vision continued to attract believers (many of them from working-class backgrounds) who never would have considered attending an SDS meeting. In the mid-1970s, pollster Daniel Yankelovich called attention to the ways in which new attitudes toward authority, sexual morality,
and self-fulfillment had spread from elite college campuses to much of the younger population: “Indeed,” he wrote, “we are amazed by the rapidity with which this process is now taking place.”

As the sixties ended, some radical leaders withdrew from the increasingly fractious realm of left-wing politics to join rural communes or mystical cults, or to embrace various “new age” therapies. The well-publicized voyage of Jerry Rubin from yippie revolutionary to yuppie networker is the best known, if not most representative, example of this process. Paul Potter, a former SDS president, was less self-serving and more reflective when he recorded his own painful withdrawal from the movement in his 1971 book *A Name for Ourselves*. Potter reaffirmed his belief in the values and concerns that had initially led him to the New Left, but rejected organized politics as a means of achieving a better world:

> I am less involved in changing America…. This does not mean that I am less angry or upset or horrified by this country than before. If anything, I am more profoundly and intuitively aware, day to day, of what an ugly society this is and how desperately it needs change. But my information comes less and less from the papers—more and more from my own experience with it.

Potter now sought to be “in touch with children,” agonized about his lingering desire for power, and found solace in daily rituals. His lover Leni Wildflower (whose adopted surname represented a symbolic break with her Old Left parents) contributed an angry foreword to *A Name for Ourselves*:

> I am trying desperately to peel away the layers of lies—trying to pull back the skin of society, school, family. The expectations which somewhere along the line got internalized. The desire to “be something,” the pretty deep conviction that I am nothing…And in the middle of my quest there are all these men laying their power-ego-identity trips on me.

The emergence of a new feminist movement had the paradoxical effect of drawing many New Left women into more active political participation while hastening the political withdrawal of many men. In the late 1960s and early 1970s few male leaders of the New Left escaped being taken to task for sexism by women in the movement. What more decisive step could men take to indicate repentance for past misdeeds than to abdicate any further claim to leadership? With the movement foundering, the “politically correct” decision often served to rationalize personal inclinations. Coinciding with the decline of the antiwar movement, a widespread and decentralized network of women’s “consciousness raising” groups, health clinics, bookstores, newspapers, publishing houses, and similar enterprises emerged, giving new meaning to the original New Left call for a “beloved community.”

V

“The sixties are over,” literary critic Morris Dickstein wrote in 1977, “but they remain the watershed of our recent cultural history; they continue to affect the ambiance of our lives in innumerable ways.” The passage of more than a decade and Ronald Reagan’s two terms in office have not lessened the truth of that observation. In the 1980s, the conservative victors found it politically convenient to lump together the vestiges of New Deal-Great Society liberalism with the memory of the New Left to justify reversing both the social legislation and the “moral permissiveness” associated with the sixties. They were quite successful in cutting back or abolishing domestic programs that had no wealthy or powerful constituency. But as the New Right’s plaintive refrain “Let Reagan be Reagan” indicated, conservatives did not have everything their own way in the 1980s. The right was forced to govern within a cultural environment that, in significant ways, limited what it could accomplish. Conservatives had

37 Ibid., p. xvi.
to repackage many of their ideas and, policies to appeal to a public that had caught a “democratic distemper” and was unwilling to defer automatically to its new governors.\textsuperscript{39}

The movements and events of the 1960s generated an attitudinal penumbra that glimmered long after SDS and SNCC had been eclipsed. Chastened by the collapse of “the movement,” many pragmatic radicals entered the left wing of the Democratic party, helping transform its stance on foreign policy and producing at least a strong rhetorical commitment to equal rights for all disadvantaged groups. In the 1970s and 1980s, erstwhile New Leftists taking a few steps toward the center met and worked alongside liberals disenchanted with cold war shibboleths who were moving gradually to the Left. The activist Left largely shed traditional Marxist concerns for issues centering on the workplace and economic growth, groping instead for a new synthesis of environmentalism, feminism, antimilitarism, and interracial solidarity.

Right-wing movements also sought to exploit the mood of morally committed idealism that sixties radicals had done so much to create; in some instances, they proved more successful than their left-wing counterparts. The impulse to expose and attack illegitimate authority was turned against legislators who tried to “solve problems by throwing money at them,” against a Democratic president [Jimmy Carter] who could neither free American hostages nor punish their captors, and against liberal judges perceived as protecting muggers, drug-pushers, or pornographers. At the same time, a vigorous libertarian spirit, itself a legacy of the sixties, acted as a countervailing force, preventing the New Right from imposing its version of morality on law and society. America’s political culture in the 1980s thus contained enough contradictory impulses to baffle the pundits who assumed that Reagan’s electoral victories represented a fundamental rightward shift.

American politics in the past decade has actually been characterized by the existence of a deep divide between two camps: one, a broad but disorganized Left, has attempted to defend and develop ideas, issues, and “life-styles” that emerged in the sixties; the other, an equally diverse but far better organized Right, has built its own influence around popular revulsion from those same images and practices. New Leftists thus succeeded in transforming American politics—though not according to the sanguine script laid out at Port Huron. The continued influence of the movements of the 1960s has been most pronounced in five aspects of contemporary American society: intellectual life, perceptions of race and of gender, foreign policy, and the language of politics itself.

According to the mythology promoted by \textit{The Big Chill}, sixties radicals had all “sold out” by the 1980s. The main characters in that film made their living by peddling running shoes or dope, writing trashy stories for \textit{People} magazine, or starring in a trashy action series on television. In real life, no doubt, some came to such ends. But thousands of others took up jobs and professions that did not represent a break with their earlier political aspirations.

They became social workers, union and community organizers, public school teachers, Legal Services lawyers, or doctors involved in occupational, or neighborhood health programs. A recent study of the political attitudes held by aging “veterans of the protest movement” discovered that a majority retained the ideological predilections of their youth.\textsuperscript{40}

Significantly, many former radicals made careers in the “information industry,” as academics, journalists, and media specialists. Conservative social scientists have done much viewing-with-alarm of this phenomenon. They blame a left-wing “new class” for undermining the public’s faith in both domestic institutions and U.S. foreign policy. Opinion surveys of the “media elite” conducted by Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman in the late 1970s found that print and electronic journalists and filmmakers overwhelmingly endorsed “strong affirmative action for doctors involved in occupational, or neighborhood health programs. A recent study of the political attitudes held by aging “veterans of the protest movement” discovered that a majority retained the ideological predilections of their youth.\textsuperscript{40}

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\textsuperscript{40} R. Kent Jennings, “Residues of a Movement: The Aging of the American Protest Generation,” \textit{American Political Science Quarterly} (June 1987): 367-82. Also see Ellen Perley Frank, “The Real ‘Big Chill’ in Michigan,” \textit{Nation}, October 31, 1987, 480-82. John Sayles, whose film \textit{The Return of the Secaucus Seven} also portrayed a reunion of New Left veterans, offered a more informed and sympathetic portrait than \textit{The Big Chill}. It is interesting to note how different the post-sixties careers of his characters were from those in \textit{The Big Chill}; among the “seven” were two public high school teachers, a drug counselor, a folksinger, the speechwriter for a liberal senator, and a female medical student hoping to become an obstetrician.
Podhoretz, Midge Decter, and Hilton Kramer sound similar alarms about the radical fifth columnists they believe have debauched American culture.41

While these attacks on the “new class” suffer from hyperbole, they do gesture at a truth about contemporary thought. Radicals probably played a larger role in the universities and the media in the 1980s than at any previous time in American history. In the fields of history and literature, the most innovative scholars have been those who sympathetically illuminate the lives and thought of subaltern groups and “deconstruct” the works and reputations of famous writers and other authorities. Different schools of Marxism, feminism, and radical linguistic theory infuse this work, which, in the spirit of the New Left, questions not just established ideas (for that is the perpetual task of good scholarship) but the methods used to create them and the consequences that flow from their application in society. Far from having cloistered themselves, as some left-wing critics have charged, radical scholars have shown considerable concern for making their views available to a nonacademic audience. Radical perspectives, albeit somewhat diluted ones, find their way into a surprising number of mainstream venues, from National Public Radio programming to the op-ed pages of the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal, to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, to historical sites like Harpers Ferry and Colonial Williamsburg (where blacksmiths in period dress pepper their narratives with insights culled from recent literature about slavery and abolitionism by such radical scholars as John Blassingame, Eugene Genovese, and Eric Foner).42

None of this, to be sure, represents a left-wing cultural coup d’état. In the media, there is little evidence that the private views of reporters control the message being transmitted on the page and screen. In academia, radical assistant professors are as preoccupied with the scramble for tenure as colleagues on their right—and lack access to the patronage and sources of alternate employment that well-funded right-wing think tanks and the Reagan administration offered to a generation of young conservative intellectuals.43 Still, the contention in the media and the university over basic questions of ideology stands in sharp contrast with the intellectual scene of the 1950s when radical journalist I. F. Stone had to start his own shoestring newsletter to publish his acute exposés of government policies; while academic mavericks like Paul Baran and C. Wright Mills nurtured their ideas largely in isolation from their colleagues.

Since the 1960s, the politics of race has been a major battleground between Left and Right. On the one hand, “new class” individuals and institutions exhibit a heightened level of racial sensitivity. The study of the history and culture of minority groups is a staple of public education, at least in urban areas. Black history was the subject of the most popular television event of the 1970s (“Roots”), while a black family served as the model of domesticity on the most popular situation comedy of the 1980s (“The Cosby Show”), and Oprah Winfrey, black hostess of the most popular daytime television talk show, portrayed her own career as the product of struggles by Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Fannie Lou Hamer.44

Millions of middle-class whites have joined with blacks in establishing a firm line demarcating acceptable from unacceptable public conduct and expression regarding race. Together they have succeeded in delegitimating beliefs that were the norm among white Americans only a generation earlier. Since the mid-1970s, any nationally prominent public figure who has castigated blacks as a people, even with humorous intent, has quickly lost reputation, employment, or both. Consider the firings of agriculture secretary Earl Butz in 1975 for telling a racist

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joke; of baseball executive Al Campanis in 1987 for questioning, on a television show commemorating the anniversary of Jackie Robinson’s major league debut, whether blacks had “the necessities” to make good managers; and of network football commentator Jimmy “the Greek” Snyder for claiming that blacks were bred by slaveholders to be faster and stronger than whites and for wanting to reserve front-office jobs for the latter. A record of hostility to the civil rights movement, even in the absence of evidence of personal racial prejudice, can also destroy careers. Judge Robert Bork’s nomination to the Supreme Court was fatally damaged by the revelation that he had described the public accommodations section of the 1964 Civil Rights Act as embodying “a principle of unsurpassed ugliness,” while Arizona governor Evan Meacham inspired a powerful impeachment movement when he refused to recognize Martin Luther King’s birthday as a state holiday. The black leader, who, in his lifetime, was harassed by the FBI, mistrusted by the presidents he dealt with, and openly despised by millions of whites, is today a national icon.45

But the new consensus on racial equality is far from universal. The Boston busing riots of the mid-1970s, the 1986 assault on three blacks who had the misfortune of having their car break down in the white Howard Beach neighborhood of New York City, and other events have revealed a bitter fraction of white working-class America that lashes out against those regarded as threats to its homes, jobs, and personal safety. Moreover, in the 1980s, students on major college campuses like Dartmouth, Penn State, and the University of Massachusetts (Amherst) engaged in racial slurs and, on a few occasions, even violence, demonstrating that segregation (albeit of an informal, interpersonal kind) still plagued these overwhelmingly white institutions. By opposing affirmative action (in the name of “equal opportunity”) and welfare programs, conservative politicians have both contributed to and benefited from such conflicts.

Meanwhile, many middle-class whites share the perception that a black “underclass” has become fatally trapped within a nexus of family dissolution, drug abuse, and crime, past all reasonable hope of salvation. Radicals and liberals won an important victory when they transformed the public language and imagery of race. But at a time when racial inequality has become primarily a question of access to wealth and secure employment, they have, for the most part, fallen into a puzzled, if not indifferent, silence about issues more complicated than Jimmy the Greek’s notions of slavery.46

Attitudes about women and women’s issues have undergone a similar change, taking a large cultural step forward while suffering a political step back, or at least sideward, in the struggle for equality of the sexes. The central ideological tenet of the new feminist movement was the idea that “the personal is political.” The most intimate and seemingly mundane details of private life—housework and childcare, among many others—were seen as fundamentally linked to social power. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, feminists struck an enormously rich vein of anger and insight about personal issues that American radical movements had never systematically addressed before.

The mass media, initially inclined to dismiss the new feminists with the trivializing designation “bra-burners,” by the mid-1970s made a dramatic about-face in their treatment of many of the movement’s concerns. Notions like “equal pay for equal work” were easily assimilated into public discourse; today most young middle-class women routinely expect to have access to the same careers and to receive the same compensation as men. What is surprising, in retrospect, is how quickly other, more highly charged, issues—rape, abortion, family violence, incest—began to attract respectful coverage in the daily press and on television. Talk shows routinely broadcast heated discussions about sexuality, day care, and birth control. “Sexism” itself has become so common a concept that even so unreflective a Reaganite as Fawn Hall immediately made use of the phrase to respond to Senator Howell Heflin’s accusation that she had stuffed classified documents into her underwear in order to smuggle them out of Oliver North’s office.

Feminists have succeeded in establishing a new “common sense” about gender roles among the urban middle class—and beyond. By the mid-1980s, according to a synthesis of opinion polls, a majority of Americans agreed with positions that, at the end of the 1960s, were the province of radical feminists. They supported federally subsidized day-care centers, sex education for the young, and the idea that men and women should share housework and child rearing equally.47 Women from constituencies that the New Left had tended to write off—the white

working class, the Catholic church, the suburbs—came to embrace feminist ideas and proposals in the course of the 1970s even though many still feel constrained to preface their new beliefs with the disclaimer, “I’m no women’s libber, but…” It was as if American society had been waiting for decades, with mounting nervousness and impatience, for some group to have the courage to come along and state the obvious about the problems between the sexes.

But, here too, not everyone was converted. The New Right accepted the challenge of “personal politics” and responded by organizing its own network of women activists. Phyllis Schlafly’s Eagle Forum, the right-to-life movement, and similar groups proved quite adept at stirring, articulating, and channeling fears about the destruction of the male-headed “traditional family.” In tandem with rising conservative politicians, they were able to block passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (despite the support the ERA consistently received in national polls). As a result, organized feminism stalled and began to be described, even by some Democrats, as merely another “special interest.”

The legacy of the sixties has continued to play an explicit role in framing popular attitudes toward military intervention abroad. Despite the appeals of President Reagan and other supporters of the Nicaraguan Contras, Americans have consistently opposed policies designed to overthrow the Sandinista government by a margin of roughly 2 to 1. That sentiment is routinely expressed as fear of stumbling into “another Vietnam”—a phrase worth examining. Understandably, Americans remember the war as a time of futile bloodletting. Many oppose U.S. intervention in Central America out of a sense of pragmatic isolationism; if the conquest of Nicaragua looked to be as effortless as that of Grenada, the public opinion polls would almost certainly look different.

For many Americans, however, the lesson of Vietnam goes beyond the need to avoid unwinnable wars. A plurality of Americans agrees retrospectively with the judgment that the antiwar movement proclaimed in the 1960s. In a May 1985 poll, taken at a moment when Reagan’s popularity was as yet untarnished by the Iran-Contra affair, 38 percent agreed that U.S. involvement in Vietnam had been both “wrong and immoral.” Only 34 percent concurred with the president’s description of the war as a “noble cause.”

Such an opinion, like that in any sphere of public controversy, reflects both conclusions drawn from immediate experience and the cumulative influence of mass-mediated images and attitudes. The popularity, not to say domination, of liberal, antiwar politics in Hollywood since the 1960s has resulted in treatments of Vietnam that are harshly critical of the premises that underlay U.S. policy. “MASH,” the highest-rated television series of the late 1970s, conveyed an implicitly pacifist message through characters who mocked conventional military authority and held no particular grudge against the Communist enemy. The 1978 film Corning Home depicted its hero, a disabled antiwar veteran, besting his sexual and political rival, another veteran who had returned home with his body intact but his mind mangled with militarist rage. The prize the two competed for was the love of a strong female character played by Jane Fonda. Oliver Stone’s 1987 production Platoon, which won the Academy Award for Best Picture, portrayed the war as seen through the eyes of a young infantryman. Even as he fights a desperate battle for personal survival, the protagonist comes to reject the mindless brutality of the war as represented by a sinister, scar-faced sergeant (a rejection symbolized, according to the truest Hollywood convention, by the hero killing the bad guy).

But attitudes toward and images of the war remain a contested terrain in Hollywood, as they do for the larger public. Michael Cimino’s The Deer Hunter, which won the Oscar for Best Picture the same year that Coming Home picked up the prizes for Best Actor and Actress, depicted Vietnamese culture as an evil, decadent force that bewildered and corrupted white ethnic GI’s before killing them. Eight years later, Sylvester Stallone, in Rambo: First Blood, Part II, took revenge, like a bare-chested, overmuscled Western sheriff, on the Vietnamese outlaws who had once defeated him. By asking, “Do we get to win this time?” and then blasting away in the affirmative, Rambo was also attacking cowardly bureaucrats back home who had reputedly scuttled the patriotic cause. In the summer of 48

Democrats who voted for Reagan in 1984 found a “preponderant concern with equality and opportunity” for women in the workplace and agreement “that women were discriminated against at work.” However, the participants also viewed blacks as a privileged group and themselves as the victims of unjust policies to help the minority at the expense of the majority (Stanley Greenberg of The Analysis Group, “Report on Democratic Defection, Prepared for the Michigan House Democratic Campaign Committee,” April 15, 1985; copy in authors’ possession).

49 Jane J. Mansbridge, Why We Lost the ERA (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); on poll results, see 201-18.


49 Ibid.

49 William Adams has perceptive things to say about Oliver Stone’s movie in “Platoon: Of Heroes and Demons,” Dissent 34 (Summer 1987): 383-86.
1987, Oliver North gained a brief but intense popularity when he enacted what might be called “Mr. Rambo Goes to Washington,” in which yet another battle-hardened warrior stood up to a pack of pusillanimous civilians.\textsuperscript{52} Vietnam remains a nightmare legacy from the sixties that Americans repeatedly put behind them and yet obsessively continue to relive.

The politics of the two major parties also reflect the impact of sixties radicalism. The most direct influence appears within the Democratic party. In many areas, local Democratic activists began to move left during the 1968 presidential campaign and, in time, found their forces strengthened by an infusion of former New Leftists. By the 1980s, left Democrats represented a variety of “single-issue” movements—black, Chicano, feminist, environmentalist, peace, gay and lesbian, and elderly—as much as they did the party apparatus itself. Such organizations as the National Organization for Women, the Sierra Club, and SANE saw their memberships swell in the early 1980s and developed increasingly professional and intermittently powerful lobbies in Washington. Liberal and radical Democratic activists helped transform Jesse Jackson into a serious candidate for president, promoted Geraldine Ferraro’s vice-presidential nomination in 1984, and set the anti-interventionist tenor of the party’s foreign policy debates. To the dismay of many party officials in the South, and those elsewhere nostalgic for the days of Jim Farley and Richard Daley, “New Politics”-style Democrats increasingly supply the financial backing, political energy, and moral élan that keeps the party organization afloat.\textsuperscript{55}

Yet what gives life to one side also provides opportunity for the other. Since the 1960s, conservative Republicans have lured away traditional Democratic voters by portraying the GOP as the only safe haven for the white ethnic working class against the onslaught of the civil rights movement and the political and social insurgencies it spawned. After taking a Watergate-induced pause in the mid-1970s, this backlash intensified, as millions of white northern voters joined southerners in rejecting the presidential candidates of their own party whom they perceived as apostles of weakness abroad and captives of single-issue “special interests” at home. Meanwhile, the New Right was using the specter of a hedonistic, God-denying counterculture to raise funds and recruit activists. Thus both parties, each in its own way, still lived off energy generated in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{54}

Notions of “personal politics” took on a new meaning in the late 1980s as a series of prominent political figures fell victim to revelations about private moral transgressions. Circumstantial evidence of adultery derailed front-runner Gary Hart’s 1988 presidential campaign, while the Supreme Court nomination of the conservative jurist Douglas Ginsburg collapsed amid reports that he had occasionally used marijuana. A libertarian impulse favoring open discussion of previously taboo subjects meshed with a lurid soap-opera-and-supermarket-tabloid-fed curiosity about the misdeeds of the highly placed. The unlucky offenders were punished not so much for having strayed from standards of behavior that relatively few American adults under the age of forty-five had themselves upheld, as for their lack of “authenticity”: Hart’s self-portrait of himself as a dedicated family man and Ginsburg’s “law-and-order” stance were revealed as shams.\textsuperscript{55}

A final way in which the sixties have influenced American politics can be seen in the use of “populist” stances by politicians of all persuasions. The past quarter-century has been a fertile breeding ground for expressions of discontent that defy old categories of “liberal” and “conservative.” Advocates of desegregation and all-white community schools, feminists and right-to-lifers, the New Left and the George Wallace presidential campaign, agreed on very little; but all railed against “the establishment” in the interests of the common folk. And from a disgruntled public, the majority of which, according to polls taken since the early 1970s, consistently feels “alienated from the power structure,” come new waves of anti-elitist anger that invigorates such movements.\textsuperscript{56} In fact, the very language of these opinion surveys again demonstrates how conventional some New Left terminology has become.

\textsuperscript{52} “Americans have fallen in love with Oliver North because they see him as a two-fisted John Wayne in a Marine uniform who beat the stuffing out of the bureaucracy—a man of action who made mincemeat of pompous, prying politicians with his honest, forthright answers” (\textit{National Enquirer}, July 28, 1987, 2).

\textsuperscript{53} To take just one group influential in Democratic party politics, NOW had 150,000 members in 1987, roughly five times its membership of a decade earlier, despite losses suffered after the defeat of the ERA. The Sierra Club, Nuclear Freeze movement, and American Civil Liberties Union enjoyed similar growth spurts during Reagan’s first term in office.


\textsuperscript{55} In the aftermath of the Ginsburg affair, several other leading political figures announced that they too had used marijuana in their early days and suffered no loss of popularity as a result. Also see Todd Gitlin and Ruth Rosen, “Give the 60’s Generation a Break,” \textit{New York Times}, November 14, 1987.

\textsuperscript{56} Harris, \textit{Inside America}, 33-38.
Populism, of course, has long been a staple of American political discourse. Ignatius Donnelly, Huey Long, and Saul Alinsky were winning votes or building movements out of such material long before young radicals moved to urban slums in the early 1960s. The unique contribution of the new radicals was to broaden the scope of the populist critique, challenging the legitimacy of cultural as well as political and economic power structures.

In ways both trivial and serious, the example, language, and actions of sixties radicals offered millions of Americans a way to express the discontent generated by the triple debacle of Vietnam, Watergate, and seventies stagflation. Often it was the New Left’s style rather than its politics that wound up being recycled in the 1970s and 1980s. Some otherwise law abiding “right-to-life” demonstrators risked arrest blockading abortion clinics while singing, in paraphrase of John Lennon, “All we are saying / is give life a chance.” Campus conservatives distributed leaflets accusing Gulf Oil of “corporate murder” because the firm does business with the pro-Soviet government of Angola.\(^{57}\) New Leftists succeeded in exposing the bankrupt policies of the liberal state in the 1960s. But that very success activated rightwing critics of liberalism who championed a “counterculture” of their own, based on biblical injunctions, the patriarchal family, and the economic homilies of nineteenth-century capitalism.

The contradictory legacy of the sixties thus provides evidence of both the failures and successes of the new radicalism—“failures” that were sometimes unavoidable, and sometimes self-inflicted, and “successes” that usually were unrecognized and were often the opposite of what was intended. Richard Hofstadter wrote in *The Age of Reform* that while it may be “feasible and desirable to formulate ideal programs of reform, it is asking too much to expect that history will move…in a straight line to realize them.”\(^{58}\) Despite the best efforts of the Reagan administration and the New Right, the 1980s did not represent a return to the “normalcy” of the 1950s. Young radicals never became serious contenders for state power, but the issues they raised and the language in which those issues were dramatized became the normal fare of American politics.

Whether scorned as pro-Communistic and nihilistic or smothered in bland nostalgia, the New Left’s reputation in the late 1980s was not all that its founders might have hoped for. But the message of the young radicals had certainly been received.

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\(^{57}\) The CBS Evening News, September 13, 1987. One of the demonstrators told a reporter that “what we need is another revolution in this country.” The anti-Gulf leaflet was written and distributed by “Students for America” in the spring of 1987.