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ALEXANDER COCKBURN AND JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

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In the Tiny Footprints of Todd Gitlin...

Those Pesky Sixties!

By Alexander Cockburn

Gerard DeGroot: *The 60s Unplugged: A Kaleidoscopic History of a Disorderly Decade*. MacMillan: 2008, 508 pp.

DeGroot, U.S.-born in 1955 and now a professor of history at the University of St Andrew's, aims to rid the Sixties decade of its revolutionary and romantic pretensions. Off the wall comes Korda's photo of Che, and the Situationist poster from the May-June days in Paris. Out goes a decade as sweet in the memory of many as a winsome hippy maiden fragrant with patchouli oil, "Tambourine Man" on the turntable, Klimt's "Judith and Holofernes" on the wall, gauzy scarf over the bedside lamp, and *The Glass Bead Game* open on the pillow. Welcome, instead, the peremptory bark of the revisionist tour guide shoving his party round the exhibits.

DeGroot wants to refocus the past: "We remember the Students for a Democratic Society but forget the Young Americans for Freedom. We recall Che Guevara's success in Cuba but not his humiliation in Bolivia." The period, DeGroot writes, is "unfortunately, a collection of beliefs zealously guarded by those keen to protect something sacred" from corrosion by "rebel analysts," among whom DeGroot numbers himself. These rebels are dismissed, he laments, as "reactionary, revisionist, or neoconservative."

DeGroot's antidote is what he accurately bills as "an impressionistic wandering through the landscape of a disorderly decade." As he rushes us along, familiar landmarks flash past, like photos glimpsed for an instant from a moving stairway. Here, in the "premonitions" section, is Ginsberg reading "Howl," the pill being invented in Worcester, Mass.,

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The Story of Gen. Petraeus' Deception and How It Easily Duped the Press and Congress

By Gareth Porter

Throughout 2007 and 2008, Gen. David Petraeus successfully directed the development of a propaganda scenario portraying a fierce struggle for Iraq between shadowy figures in Iran, fueling "proxy war" against the United States through its support for "special groups," and U.S. forces working to roll up those Iranian-sponsored networks.

That story line was extraordinarily useful to the Bush administration – or, more precisely, to the Bush-Cheney White House and the U.S. military command in Iraq. It served three distinct purposes simultaneously. First, it provided a new rationale for U.S. occupation in Iraq that promised to stretch years into the future – fighting Shiite foes, which were supposedly sponsored by Iran. As al Qaeda's power seemed to fade during 2007, that purpose filled what would otherwise have been a void in regard to reasons for a continued U.S. military role in the country.

Second, the assertion of Iranian troublemaking in Iraq provided a rationale for the limited attack on Iranian bases, which was Dick Cheney's ambition, and, thus, for a possible trigger for an Iranian response that could justify an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.

But it also serves to divert attention from the embarrassing fact that the Bush administration and Iran have been backing the same horse in Iraq. Since early 2005, Iranian strategy has been centered on support for Shiite-dominated regime in Baghdad, because those governments were led by and dependent on the political support of loyal Iraqi agents of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from the time the IRGC had created the Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq and the Dawa Party

in Iran during the Iran-Iraq War. The Baghdad regime, therefore, represents a joint U.S.-Iranian condominium.

The "proxy war" propaganda claim has revolved around one central lie, which is that Iran has used "special groups," meaning militia groups that have broken away from Sadr, to try to force the United States out of Iraq and destabilize the Iraqi regime. The term "special groups" itself was invented not by Iran but by the U.S. military, according to Ned Parker of the *Los Angeles Times*, who has covered the Mahdi Army closely. Parker told me in a telephone interview in May 2008, "It seems the purpose of the term is to distinguish within the Mahdi Army between those they can work with and those they can't." Parker believes this is "the useful effect of the term."

Other terms used by the U.S. military for Iran-backed breakaway Mahdi Army units – "rogue elements" and "criminal elements" – were equally deceptive. On his pro-war site, Bill Roggio reported in late February 2007 that "military and intelligence sources" privately dismissed the idea of "rogue elements" of the Mahdi Army. "The 'rogue element' narrative," Roggio explained, "provides Mahdi Army fighters and commanders an 'out'." He wrote, "They can choose to oppose the government and be targeted or step aside and join the political process."

In other words, the definition of a "special group" or "rogue element" had nothing to do with independence from Muqtada al-Sadr or links with Iran. It was simply a matter of whether the given unit was resisting or cooperating with the U.S. occupation.

The U.S. command has been remarkably stingy about providing evidence in

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Lumumba murdered in Katanga, Lady Chatterley on trial at the Old Bailey, with Lord Hailsham touchingly confiding in the House of Lords that before judging Chatterley and Mellers, he wanted to know “what sort of parents they became... I should have liked to know how Mellors would have survived living on Connie’s rentier income of six hundred pounds...”

Round the museum we dash, from Sharpeville to the Bay of Pigs, to Margate (mods and rockers), to Muhammad Ali, to Mary Quant. Here, at the half-way mark, are the Black Panthers and Cesar Chavez, with the Tet offensive, just around the corner. Through ’68 we scoot, past the Papal encyclical on contraception, past Altamont, Chappaquiddick and the Moon landing, and suddenly we’re out again in the cool light of 2008, with a parting sniff from DeGroot that “by paying so much attention to what was happening on Maggie’s Farm, we failed to notice the emergence of Maggie Thatcher.”

DeGroot derides all the usual suspects – the anti-war movement, radical blacks, hippies – for sins of arrogance, self-aggrandizement, credulity, self-indulgence. He gets his teeth in Muhammad Ali’s ankle and hangs on for a full eight pages,

which contain comical sentences such as: “The day after Ali announced his conversion [to Islam] both the FBI and the Defense Department opened inquiries into his draft status. Given the close sequence, it is easy to conclude that Ali was being punished.”

Yes, indeed, it’s easy to reach that conclusion because it is obviously true. But DeGroot marches on, zealous to be fair to two government agencies obsessed with the menace of black insurgency and, indeed, complicit in the assassination of black leaders such as Fred Hampton. “The issue, however, is much more complicated than Ali worshipers seem to understand.” The government, you see, was merely following established bureau-

Though he’s unusually querulous and small-minded, DeGroot is scarcely a pioneer in the enterprise of Sixties revisionism.

cratic procedures. “To single him out as uniquely mistreated denigrates the experiences of those who suffered more.”

What a weird foray into belittlement! Here’s an extraordinary athlete who took his courageous opposition (“I ain’t got no quarrel with them Vietcong”) to a terrible war to the level of a direct challenge to the U.S. government, which cost his heavyweight crown and almost his career, plus a five-year prison sentence that hung over him from 1967 to 1971, till the U.S. Supreme Court upheld his “conscientious objector” status. All DeGroot can do is squawk that the government was doing its job, and that Ali’s travails weren’t unique, which no one has claimed anyway.

DeGroot’s putdowns are all on this trivial, slapdash level. Having foolishly stated in his introduction that no one remembers Che Guevara’s end in Bolivia, thus minimizing the enduring currency of the famous photograph (actually reprinted in his book) of the guerrilla leader dead on his stretcher surrounded by Bolivian soldiers, DeGroot writes that “it is easy to admire a peasant revolution from the safe refuse of an ivory tower.” And just as easy, one might add, to in-

scribe such sarcasms in the tenured seclusion of the University of St Andrew’s, without any apparent effort to do serious research into the Venceremos Brigades and kindred solidarity movements. As a historian, DeGroot repeatedly puts up a very poor show. His ignorant underestimate of the very great and progressive consequences of Cuba’s activities in Africa, pioneered by Guevara, is a case in point.

Though he’s unusually querulous and small-minded, DeGroot is scarcely a pioneer in the enterprise of Sixties revisionism. Year after year, these revisionists, such as Todd Gitlin, try to stuff the Sixties back in the box. If it truly was just another, not-so-remarkable decade, as DeGroot claims, the revisionists wouldn’t keep flailing away. Deflation of the Sixties is always on the political and cultural agenda because the decade really was a revolutionary one. DeGroot somehow doesn’t get this one big truth. In the United States, one can see its consequences on every side, from the vastly improved coffee and bread, to the Clean Air Act and the Endangered Species Act, to the Native American insurgency, to the permanent attrition of respect suffered by government institutions such as the FBI and the CIA, whose exposure in *Ramparts* in 1967 DeGroot incomprehensibly overlooks. If it wasn’t for the Sixties, opposition to the war in Iraq wouldn’t be a respectable mainstream position in the United States. If it wasn’t for the Sixties, Barack Obama would not be the Democratic nominee for the presidency, from which eminence he will, no doubt, be prompted to repeat his reproofs of its excesses. CP

Why Life is Getting Harder for Most People By Serge Halimi

Employees at all levels are worried about the cost of food. Low-paid workers and the elderly are reduced to sifting through supermarket rejects: the problem of purchasing power is destroying the credibility of governments everywhere. In France, Italy and Britain, the parties in power have been soundly defeated in local elections. In the United States, the Republican Party has lost three of its traditional strongholds since March,

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