

By David Moberg

CHICAGO

**T**HE WHOLE WORLD WAS WATCHING "20 years ago as Chicago police waded into crowds of thousands of antiwar protesters, clubbing, macing, teargassing and arresting with brute force, as an unresponsive Democratic Party a few miles away sent Hubert Humphrey on his way to defeat at the hands of Richard Nixon.

But what did they see?

Two decades later the implications of that explosive week can still be felt for good and ill in American politics and culture. From a distance it looks like a tragedy, a conflict that rationally could have been avoided but somehow had to take place.

It would have been a great defeat for the antiwar movement and for the right to dissent in the U.S. not to have had a presence at the Democratic convention. It was essential to protest a war that President Lyndon Johnson had wound up, not down as he had promised. It was also necessary to give voice to the strong antiwar sentiments from the primaries that were virtually suffocated with the assassination of Robert Kennedy and muffled in the convention itself. Few who took part—and I was among them—regret being there.

**Mixed legacy:** But many people now regret what came out of it. As former Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) President Carl Oglesby noted in a recent weekend of reassessments by many Chicago '68 protesters, at the beginning of 1968 the antiwar movement was winning in the battle for public support. But by the end of the year the movement was on the defensive. Broad public opposition to the war grew, yet ironically public sympathy for the antiwar protesters did not. And in a further twist of history, the convention protests probably did spur many thousands of people, especially students and young people, to become more politically active. It was a mix of success and failure.

The convention brought to a head a "collision of forces" long in the making, argued former SDS leader Todd Gitlin, author of *The Sixties*. The New Deal liberal coalition, already under strain, cracked farther apart and has never come back together. The fragile links between liberals and the left had already been deeply strained by events such as the liberal establishment refusal to seat the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegation at the 1964 Democratic convention and the divisive Gulf of Tonkin resolution that gave Johnson wide war-fighting powers in Vietnam. But the '68 convention snapped the bonds, Gitlin said. The fault lay mainly with the obstinacy of Johnson, Humphrey and Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, and the forces they represented, but the damage was spread all around.

Much of the New Left rushed off on a chimerical pursuit of militancy and shrill, rhetorical "revolution" that not only ignored

# ANARCHY in the U.S.

The 20th  
anniversary  
of the 1968  
Democratic  
convention  
in Chicago  
prompts  
a wave of  
critical  
reappraisal

its creative roots in the early and mid-'60s but also made itself irrelevant to a public that was increasingly sympathetic to the movement's original message of participatory democracy, equal rights and a less imperial foreign policy. When continued non-violence, even in the face of officially sanctioned violence such as in Chicago, would have given the movement ongoing moral credibility with the vast majority, some New Leftists were tempted to prove they could be urban rioters or guerrillas like

their Third World heroes. The vast majority remained more cautious, closer to the democratic, non-violent roots of the New Left and more pragmatic politically. But the shrill posturing cast a pall over the whole movement.

**Suppression out of control:** The convention week convinced many that "the system doesn't work." After all, Daley had stonewalled and denied applications for permits to march and protest. And the attacks of the police on both the demonstrators and the press were not so much the result of offended cops "rioting" out of control as they were systematic attempts to suppress free speech and the press—as writer John Schultz, who wrote an eyewitness account, *No One Was Killed*, and former *Chicago Daily News* convention protest reporter Hank DeZutter maintained.

Given the image of the convention as a "violent confrontation" and its later effect on young leftists, it is important to recall how very little violence came from any of the protesters. There were a few left groups, including some from SDS, who wanted to fight with the police. But having just arrived in Chicago for the convention from the May '68 street demonstrations that rocked Paris, I was struck by how restrained the crowd was, even when attacked, and how few missiles were thrown at the police. In any case, much of the provocation and violence came from undercover police. (Military intelligence sources later estimated that one in six demonstrators was an undercover agent.) But there had also been inflated rhetoric that in part may have been Yippie theater to get press attention, but ultimately backfired.

Yippies wanted good theater, and they

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