

Max Elbaum

NEW EDITION

Revolution in the Air

Sixties Radicals turn to Lenin, Mao and Che

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REVOLUTION IN THE AIR

**SIXTIES RADICALS TURN TO
LENIN, MAO AND CHE**



MAX ELBAUM



VERSO

London • New York

For James and your generation

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Introduction

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"THE SYSTEM" BECOMES THE TARGET

The conventional wisdom concerning sixties radicals delivers a simple verdict: the decade started with idealistic, impassioned young people putting their lives on the line to end segregation and register voters in a struggle to fulfill the promise of America. It ended with days of rage as the sixties movements, frustrated by the Vietnam War, became irrational and self-destructive. The trajectory of the sixties is thus traced by the arc from "We Shall Overcome" to "Street Fighting Man" and "Helter-Skelter." But if once again the conventional wisdom is proclaiming the "end of ideology," perhaps it's time to take another look at the radicalism of the sixties – a look beyond the familiar icons of pre-1968 saintly community organizers and post-1968 Weather Underground wild in the streets. Certainly the young radicals charged right past traditional boundaries in those explosive years. But was their direction completely irrational? Closer to the opposite is true: as a result of their engagement in the struggle against the war in Vietnam and racism at home, millions of young people attained new levels of insight into the extent of inequality and militarism in US society – and their deep structural roots.

These rebellious youth believed that there was a connection between the war in Vietnam and the fifty-plus other US military interventions in Latin America, Africa and Asia between 1898 and 1965.¹ They concluded that one-time Marine General Smedley Butler was simply admitting the truth when he declared, "I spent most of my time [in military service] being a high-class muscle man for Big Business, for Wall Street and for the bankers...."² They didn't think it was either accidental or acceptable that the average income for families of color in 1967 was just 62 percent

of white family income – and that in 1972 the figure was exactly the same.³ They insisted that something systemic was at work when even the official National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders reported in 1968 – four years after the end of legal segregation – that the country was becoming “two societies, one Black and one white, separate and unequal.”⁴ And they got angry when that commission’s recommendations for social programs to address the gap were rejected as too expensive.⁵

Of course, heightened political awareness provoked a new set of hard questions. Above all, it raised that classic question, “What is to be done?” In grappling with this problem the young revolutionaries of the late 1960s displayed confusion, naiveté, and sometimes downright foolishness. But the more remarkable thing is how accurately they targeted the obstacles they were up against; how doggedly they worked to overcome their own prejudices and limitations; and how many of the issues they identified remain at the top of the progressive agenda today.

1968: “It All Fit Together”

The watershed year for the emergence of a revolutionary-minded layer of activists was 1968. Beginning with the explosion of the Vietnamese Tet offensive at the end of January, that year’s extraordinary calendar included Lyndon Johnson’s forced withdrawal from the presidential race in March; the assassination of Martin Luther King in April followed by Black uprisings in more than 100 cities; Robert Kennedy’s assassination in June; and the nomination of Hubert Humphrey as Democratic candidate for president that August while police battered demonstrators in the streets of Chicago.

This rapid series of jolts altered the country’s political landscape, sharpening the racial and political polarizations that were already disrupting business-as-usual. They propelled fresh waves of people, especially young people, toward involvement in protest demonstrations. They catapulted the use of political violence to center-stage and persuaded millions that the official violence of the police and military had no greater relationship to law, order or moral legitimacy than the violence used by the government’s opponents. (Meanwhile, they convinced millions of others that an even more ruthless government crackdown was needed.) And within the now-burgeoning opposition movements, they produced a decisive leftward shift. They persuaded thousands that the traditional channels for changing public policy were closed, and that ending war and racial inequality – the two overriding goals of the 1960s upheavals – required more than “speaking truth to power.” Rather, achieving peace and equality required the oppressed layers of society to take power into their own hands.

And – shocking as it seems today – winning power seemed like it might just be

possible. The Tet offensive not only shattered Washington’s claims of imminent victory in Vietnam but raised the prospect of an outright US defeat, thus boosting the confidence of insurgencies throughout the global South as well as opposition movements at home. The depth and breadth of anger in the African American community – demonstrated in more than 300 urban rebellions between 1964 and summer 1968 – indicated that a mass social force “ready for anything” was coming into being.⁶ Then in May a combination of French students-on-the-barricades and workers-on-strike nearly succeeded in toppling the government of an industrialized capitalist country in the heart of Europe.

By fall 1968, public opinion polls indicated that one million students saw themselves as part of the left, and 368,000 people “strongly agreed” on the need for a “mass revolutionary party.”⁷ Among African Americans revolutionary sentiments contended not just for influence but for pre-eminence, at least among those thirty years old and under. Chicano, Puerto Rican, Asian American and Native American youth were forming new radical organizations and seizing the ideological initiative in their communities.

The combined effect was unmistakable: just fifteen years after McCarthyism had pushed US radicalism all but underground, a new revolutionary current was taking shape. Indeed, the experiences of 1968 were so intense, so life-transforming, that today it is difficult to read first-person accounts of them without a sense of being transported almost to another world:

There’s this tremendous ferment. You get up in the morning and you look for the demonstration. You look for the protest. You look for something to be different before nightfall. It was natural. John Coltrane died in 1967 at age thirty-nine. Malcolm X was killed. Che Guevara dies. King dies. It all fit together. – Bill Sales, in 1968 a leader of the Student Afro-American Society at Columbia⁸

We had organizers in every rent strike, every welfare rights organization, every women’s group. Every single organizing project in the whole city by the spring of ‘68 had an SF State student as their organizer.... The capacity to provide academic credit for students complemented our control of the student government so that we dispensed all work-study jobs. Plus, the fact that the leadership of these programs, the graduate students, also had part-time instructorships at the college gave us control of the TA union. And we were making contact with the radical wing of the American Federation of Teachers and we knew almost every secretary in every department, and we knew what every administrator was doing before they did. We had a network that went as far as Sacramento [the central offices of the state college system]. We had political power, and it grew quietly. We had a power base that touched every single ghetto and barrio in the city... – Sharon Gold (Martinas), on the buildup to the 1968–69 Third World Liberation Front–led strike at San Francisco State University⁹

I thought I would be head of the party school in the New Left international that would grow out of SDS. If people wearing Levis and wanting to dance to rock 'n roll was some kind of a sea change, then this [France in May 1968] was the next sign of that change. It was massive. It was widespread. In SDS we had some contacts with these other student movements – the German SDS, the Japanese Zengakuren, the French students. We knew they were the same as us, and that they too were on the cutting edge of history. We assumed there would be something like a new international. Obviously it was so incredibly unworkable as to be loony to think of it. But on the other hand that was one direction things could go. The popularity of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones and Dylan, and whatever, gave you the idea that there was no way to predict how a revolution could take place, but you were part of a mighty and unstoppable human surge. – Paul Buhle, a founder of *Radical America* magazine in 1967, later a historian of the US left¹⁰

“Three Million Think Revolution Is Needed”

For several years after 1968, additional upheavals increased the numbers and resolve of the young revolutionaries. Richard Nixon's doomed efforts to win the war in Southeast Asia led directly to the debacle of his May 1970 invasion of Cambodia, which resulted in the biggest protest explosion on US college campuses in history. A few months afterwards, the *New York Times* reported that four out of ten college students – nearly three million people – thought a revolution was necessary in the US.¹¹ Meanwhile, an unprecedented rebellion was raging within the military itself, spearheaded by Black soldiers on the ground in Vietnam. A 1970 survey showed that 30.6 percent of Black enlisted men planned “to join a militant Black group like the [Black] Panthers” when they returned home.¹²

On the labor front there was a revival of trade union militancy: 1969 saw more work stoppages than any year since 1945, and 1970 was even hotter.¹³ A radical upsurge among African American workers in the auto plants of Detroit and increasing rebelliousness among many young white workers sparked more than a few revolutionary dreams and corporate nightmares. Among all racial and national minorities identification with the worldwide rising of peoples of color grew dramatically, and it became commonplace for US activists to term their communities “Third World peoples” within this country's borders. The early 1970s also saw tremendous growth of the women's liberation movement, which had first emerged as a nationwide force in 1968, and, following the Stonewall Rebellion of June 1969, the new gay liberation movement.

By 1972–73, there were signs that the ever-resourceful US elite was managing to redirect discontent into safer channels. But the holes in establishment power and traditional thinking opened since 1968 were too deep to be patched over easily. In 1970 for example, *Business Week* editorialized: “The invasion of Cambodia and the senseless shooting of four students at Kent State University in Ohio have consoli-

dated the academic community against the war, against business and against government. This is a dangerous situation. It threatens the whole economic and social structure of the nation.”¹⁴ A full three years later the *New York Times* still felt the need to carry an extended series on its op-ed page entitled “Capitalism, for Better or Worse.”¹⁵

To be sure, the 1968–73 period was not typical. But the years in which social struggles simmer beneath the surface always outnumber those in which they conspicuously seize center-stage and are self-consciously waged by millions. The bottom line is that the upheavals of those years did not stem from historical accident, individual idiosyncrasy or collective irrationality. Quite the opposite: this turmoil had deep, material roots in the structure of US society and in the clash between one set of social forces seeking to alter that structure and another seeking to maintain its power and privilege. The revolutionary current that took shape during and immediately after 1968 based itself on the recognition of this irreconcilable conflict and determination to focus on the systemic roots of inequality, injustice and war. Thus, for all the exaggerations in its rhetoric and tactics, it marked an ideological *advance* over what had come before.

Preparing the Ground

The new political force that came together in 1968 was the result of a whole array of experiences, accumulated over more than a decade of struggle, in which young people who began as innocents learned one hard lesson after another about power, the nature of social conflict, and US society. The explosive events of 1968 reverberated among a layer of youth already immersed in struggles for social change and already embarked upon a deep-going ideological quest. The remainder of this chapter can only review in capsule form the chief events that transformed the consciousness of sixties activists, but this staccato recounting will convey at least some of this period's intensity and indicate how deeply the turn to revolutionary politics was grounded in concrete experience.

The prime force initiating a generation's ideological evolution from 1950s conformism to 1968 revolutionism was the civil rights movement. Beginning with the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955–56, this fight for racial equality played a decisive role in reopening space for all expressions of political dissent in the wake of McCarthyism. The movement's fight to end legal segregation and the white monopoly on political power challenged deeply entrenched interests and was protracted and bitter. Its success – legislatively expressed in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 – was a monumental achievement. Breaking Jim Crow was an indispensable precondition for opening the path to further gains, not just for the antiracist movement but for all democratic movements. Further, by

sweeping away the legal edifice of segregation, it pushed millions toward recognition that racial inequality in the US was not simply a matter of unjust laws or individual prejudice, but was related to the country's fundamental economic and social structure. The civil rights movement's success in mobilizing masses, defying unjust laws and changing the country was paramount in fostering self-confidence among the new radicals. The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) – which led the way in grassroots organizing in the most dangerous parts of the South – embodied audacity and persistence, and it was SNCC more than any other group that shaped the consciousness of the early New Left.¹⁶

Abroad, the victory of the Cuban Revolution on January 1, 1959 fed into this same optimistic spirit. The ouster of a hated dictator by the young guerrillas of the 26th of July Movement was taken as another sign that moral righteousness combined with bold action could triumph against tremendous odds. C. Wright Mills – about the closest thing much of the early white New Left had to a mentor – was deeply affected by the Cuban experiment, and his scathing denunciations of US policy introduced many young activists to their first analysis of America-as-empire. The work of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee also injected a strongly internationalist and anti-imperialist component into early 1960s activism.¹⁷ The 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion – and in a different way the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis – served as wake-up calls about the aggressive, antidemocratic militarism of US policy, even under the liberal John F. Kennedy.

Against this backdrop, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) developed as the main expression of early 1960s radicalism among white students.¹⁸ By 1964 SDS had distanced itself from its nominal parent, the social democratic League for Industrial Democracy, and all formal ties were severed the following year. By that time SNCC and SDS had established themselves as the two premier organizations of the New Left. Neither was explicitly anticapitalist. But both were characterized by a commitment to direct action, by a radical sensibility, and by enthusiasm for challenging official dogmas. Simultaneous with the civil rights movement's legislative victories came Lyndon Johnson's sharp 1964–65 escalation of the Vietnam War. An antiwar movement mobilized in response and soon assumed a sustained, mass character. Through the late 1960s and into the 1970s, the antiwar and antiracist movements served as the central axes of large-scale protest, the main arenas in which new layers of radicals emerged and where they developed their thinking.

The Move Toward the Left Accelerates

Between 1964 and 1967, both the expansion and leftward transition of the activist ranks accelerated. The refusal of the Democratic Party to seat the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) delegation at its 1964 Atlantic City Convention

was a particularly significant turning point. The official Mississippi delegation was openly segregationist while the MFDP, which had painstakingly built both its base and its case, was represented by outstanding grassroots leaders such as Fannie Lou Hamer. Even so, liberalism's most prominent stalwarts – from vice-presidential nominee Hubert Humphrey to United Auto Workers head Walter Reuther – loyally carried out Lyndon Johnson's strategy and froze the MFDP out.

This betrayal of racial justice in favor of political expediency solidified many activists' suspicions of official liberalism. No longer did Democratic Party liberals seem to be allies (if faint-hearted ones) in the battle for justice. Rather they came to be regarded as merely the "good cops" in a "good cop/bad cop" division of labor within the establishment. Directly linked to this shift, a seemingly subtle but quite significant change began to take place in activists' view of the nature of that establishment. The analytical framework of "power elite" – C. Wright Mills' term¹⁹ – increasingly gave way to that of a full-blown ruling class. And while a power elite may be displaced or its power eroded in a number of ways, traditionally the only way to get rid of a ruling class is to overthrow it.

That same year the civil rights movement served as the direct catalyst for Berkeley's Free Speech Movement, which opened the era of large-scale campus protests by white students. Also in 1964, Malcolm X broke away from the Nation of Islam and founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity, trying to give organizational expression to the revolutionary internationalist outlook that characterized the final stage of his political evolution. Malcolm had a direct personal influence on key circles of activists – including a large portion of SNCC, which was then in the process of "transformation from being simply a militant civil rights organization to becoming a major source of radical ideas and strategies."²⁰ After Malcolm's assassination (February 21, 1965) and the publication of his *Autobiography* that same year, his ideas galvanized a far larger audience.²¹ The *Autobiography of Malcolm X* was without question the single most widely read and influential book among young people of all racial backgrounds who went to their first demonstration sometime between 1965 and 1968.

Meanwhile the rage Malcolm so eloquently articulated exploded in city streets every summer from 1964 to 1968. In 1964, 15 urban rebellions shook the country; in 1965 there were 9; in 1966, 38; in 1967, 128; and in 1968, 131, most but not all in the days after the assassination of Martin Luther King.²² According to the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, about 18 percent of the Black population within the affected areas – almost one out of every five residents – participated in these uprisings, and the majority of African Americans nationwide felt that rebellions would have beneficial consequences for improving economic and social conditions.²³ The demand for Black Power spread like wildfire after Stokely Carmichael and other leading SNCC activists made the phrase a central feature of

their agitation during their June 1966 March Against Fear across Mississippi after James Meredith was shot. While the actual content of Black Power was subject to a variety of interpretations (including versions promoting Black capitalism), its main thrust cut to the left, inspiring a deeper challenge to white supremacy.

In these same years, US farmworkers began to mobilize in a meshing of anti-racist and trade union activism. On September 16, 1965 – the anniversary of Mexican independence from Spain in 1810 – the mainly Mexican and Chicano members of the National Farm Workers Association led by César Chávez voted to join a strike against 33 California grape ranches begun eight days earlier by the mostly Filipino Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee. The two groups soon merged to form the United Farmworkers Union (UFW), whose five-year-long grape growers strike and boycott changed business-as-usual in the “factories in the fields.” And with boycott committees working nationwide, the strike inspired a whole layer of young people not just in the Chicano and Asian American communities but well beyond.

Events on the decade's other central battlefield were also reshaping activists' ideas. During negotiations for the first major nationwide demonstration against the Vietnam War – called by SDS for April 17, 1965 – a struggle broke out over the longstanding practice of “respectable” peace organizations excluding communists from participation. SDS defied that tradition, accepted the endorsement of communist-linked groups, and allowed marchers to carry any signs they wished – including ones calling for the victory of Vietnam's National Liberation Front. The group withstood a major red-baiting campaign in the media and mobilized 15,000 protesters for a major success. Of course, the antiwar movement, like the civil rights and Black Power movements, would continue to be red-baited throughout its existence. But SDS's accomplishment shattered a long-effective formula for preventing protest movements from even considering anticapitalist analyses of US society.

Not coincidentally, the progressive media began to bring government lies and imperial strategies into the light of day. These days one hardly has to be a radical to believe that the US government lies as a matter of course. But today's reader should not underestimate what a jolt it was for *Ramparts* magazine to reveal in 1966 that Michigan State University had assisted counter-insurgency efforts in Vietnam and in 1967 that the CIA was secretly funding the National Student Association.²⁴ And increasingly radical ideas were matched by increasing militancy on the ground, with 1967 seeing massive confrontations during Stop the Draft Week in Oakland and at the Pentagon in October, as well as the founding of Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW).

King's Watershed Antiwar Speech

That same year Martin Luther King gave his momentous “breaking silence” speech condemning the Vietnam War. Defying intense pressure from the Johnson administration and much of the civil rights establishment, King began to speak consistently in terms of the direct links between US violence in Vietnam, racism at home and profit-seeking economic interests.

The murder of Che in Bolivia in 1967, and more generally Cuba's advocacy of hemispheric revolution during 1966 and 1967, also had a significant impact. In the phrase popular at the time, young people were “making connections” at a break-neck pace. How could it be otherwise, when they saw such juxtapositions as SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael (later Kwame Ture) arriving as an honored guest in Cuba in the midst of the bloodiest urban rebellion yet, the July 1967 uprising in Detroit during which forty-one people were killed.²⁵ Stokely's angry response in Havana calling for armed revolution in the US (among other things), was front page news, and leading politicians demanded his imprisonment. But activists focused on the dead in Detroit, the hundreds killed every week in Vietnam, and the solidarity extended by the Cubans to the Black liberation movement.

Just a month before, rumors of “Castro-trained guerrillas trying to take over northern New Mexico” had spread through the government's nuclear laboratory in Los Alamos when twenty members of the Alianza Federal de Mercedes (later called the Alianza Federal de Pueblos Libres/Alliance of Free Peoples) led by Reies López Tijerina conducted an armed takeover of the county courthouse in Tierra Amarilla. The action was part of a long campaign to win recognition of land grants and regain thousands of acres of stolen from New Mexicans of Mexican descent. The audacity of the Tierra Amarilla raid – and Tijerina's stunning acquittal in 1968 on charges stemming from it – fed into the explosion of the Chicano movement in subsequent years and also into alliance-building efforts with other constituencies, especially Native Americans engaged in battles for land and respect for treaties signed by the US government.

The mid-sixties also saw an outpouring of radical literature to nourish organizers' growing intellectual appetites. Malcolm's *Autobiography* has already been mentioned; *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon was published in the US in 1963; *One-Dimensional Man* by Herbert Marcuse in 1964; *Monopoly Capital* by Paul A. Baran and Paul M. Sweezy in 1966; *Who Rules America?* by G. William Domhoff, and *Containment and Change* by Carl Oglesby and Richard Schaul in 1967.²⁶ Radical periodicals, old and newly launched, began to circulate more widely in activist ranks and 1964 saw the birth of the underground press. Gillo Pontecorvo's film *Battle of Algiers* (1966) painted one of the most vivid pictures of Western colonialism and Third World resistance ever put on film.

For anyone doubting just how far left the exploration within the protest movements actually was, a review of Dr. Martin Luther King's 1967 book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* would be an eye-opener.²⁷ The sanitized version of King's ideas presented on the national holiday commemorating his birthday each year has little in common with the systemic critique of US society he presented in that volume and his belief that a militant and multifaceted grassroots movement was the key to changing it. During the last months of his life, King was immersed in organizing a militant Poor People's Campaign in an attempt to translate his increasingly radical analysis into a powerful force.

Nevertheless, until 1968 only a small minority within activist circles embraced revolutionary politics, much less believed that a revolutionary platform could attract mass support. Their ranks at the beginning of the 1960s consisted almost exclusively of the members of small Old Left groups that had been badly battered by McCarthyism. As the decade went by a number of these organizations grew, and other circles of activists without an Old Left heritage (or with only an indirect one) began to move leftwards. Most important was the steady radicalization of the leading circles within SNCC, SDS and the layers of Black activists influenced by Malcolm X and/or civil rights activist and armed self-defense advocate Robert F. Williams. Many of the latter joined together in the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) beginning in 1962, while others founded the soon-to-shake-the-country Black Panther Party in 1966. Support for revolutionary views was growing, but was still confined to clusters of key organizers.

Then came the shocks of 1968.

Revolution in the Air

The year's first major shock – the Vietnamese Tet offensive – was all the greater for being a near-complete surprise to war-makers and war protesters alike. Beginning January 30 the National Liberation Front (NLF) launched a coordinated nationwide assault that attacked 120 cities, 36 of Vietnam's 44 provincial capitals, and the US Embassy in Saigon; the city of Hue was taken and held for four weeks.²⁸ The war's major turning point, Tet exposed the weakness of the South Vietnamese regime, revealed the complete failure of Washington's Vietnam policy, and shattered the consensus that had up until then prevailed within the US political and military leadership. In the aftermath of Tet major figures begin to openly express doubts about the war. The most jarring public statement was Walter Cronkite's declaration in a February 27 CBS special report that the US was mired in a stalemate and must negotiate a way out.²⁹

The Tet offensive forced Lyndon Johnson to convene an extraordinary blue ribbon advisory group of Washington establishment figures – the "Wise Men" –

to study the Vietnam situation and give him their conclusions. They (secretly) reported to Johnson in late March that the war could not be won and that the domestic cost of pursuing victory was too high. This report – coming on top of Senator Eugene McCarthy's antiwar challenge to Johnson in the Democratic presidential primaries and the continued growth of grassroots antiwar activity – was the immediate trigger for Johnson's dramatic March 31 withdrawal from the 1968 presidential race and his announcement that peace talks would begin. On the other side of the barricades Tet's impact was extraordinary: for activists, the US was no longer just a brutal war-maker or even dangerous imperialist – it was one that could be beaten.

Martin Luther King was assassinated just four days after Johnson's announcement. King's murder set off a nationwide upheaval, with rebellions by African Americans in more than 100 cities. In Washington, D.C. flames reached within six blocks of the White House and machine guns were mounted on the Capitol balcony and White House lawn. Forty-six people were killed across the country, 2,500 were injured, and it took 70,000 federal troops to restore order.³⁰ For activists, King's murder symbolized the depth of the system's incorrigibility and convinced thousands that the nonviolent road he advocated was a dead end. Then the argument that change could be made through existing channels suffered another blow on June 5 when Robert Kennedy – who had mounted his own antiwar candidacy after McCarthy paved the way – was assassinated in Los Angeles, just after his victory in the California presidential primary.

Between these two assassinations came the biggest campus rebellion since Berkeley's 1964 Free Speech Movement, when more than 1,000 students occupied five buildings at Columbia. The protest was directed against the university's plans to build a gymnasium in the adjoining Black community and displace the people living on the proposed site, as well as Columbia's ties to the Vietnam War-linked Institute for Defense Analysis. Black students held one building and whites four others; mass arrests and police brutality ended the occupations and spurred a new round of campus radicalization nationwide.

In May came the millions-strong upheaval in France. US activists watched TV network news reports on the famous "night of the barricades" in Paris³¹ and read about the general strike of nearly ten million workers in both the mainstream and alternative media.³² But what really drove Paris' intoxicating message home was hearing direct, eyewitness accounts of student-worker alliances and rapidly growing revolutionary organizations from French or US activists who toured US campuses after being on the scene.

Then in August came the Democratic convention with its nomination of Hubert Humphrey as police attacked demonstrators outside the convention hall. The protesters' chant, "The whole world is watching!" was literal truth, and the

event polarized the country. For tens of thousands, the combination of unrestrained police violence with Humphrey's selection – which meant that both major parties fielded pro-war presidential candidates – drove the final nail in the coffin of work-within-the-system formulas.

Just before the Democratic convention the Soviets had invaded Czechoslovakia, a watershed not only in international politics but for the thinking of the new radical current. Just as a new wave of young people were becoming revolutionaries, the Soviet Union was acting like anything but a force for freedom and liberation. Rather, when faced with a challenge from below, it responded with the same kind of militarism and repression as the US.

Beyond those headline-grabbing events, a host of other clashes and movements kept the pot boiling. From fall 1968 on a continuous wave of protests rocked the campuses. Among these, the months-long strike led by the Third World Liberation Front at San Francisco State University beginning in November 1968 and the spring 1969 Third World Strike at UC Berkeley were watersheds in galvanizing a new level of student militancy under the leadership of students of color. They also scored tangible victories, winning the first-ever ethnic studies programs at US universities. In 1970 the People's Park fight at Berkeley – which resulted in the virtual military occupation of the city for two weeks – and smaller-scale but similar fights in other college towns showed that large youth/counterculture communities near the campuses had emerged as additional centers of protest.

But the largest post-1968 protest was the explosion following the 1970 US invasion of Cambodia. After narrowly defeating Hubert Humphrey in the 1968 presidential election, Richard Nixon built his Southeast Asia policy around the strategy of "Vietnamization": continue the war – in fact, escalate the killing by beginning secret bombing in Cambodia and intensifying the air war against North Vietnam – but withdraw increasing numbers of US ground troops to lower the US body count and defuse antiwar sentiment at home. Radical antiwar activists called this simply "changing the color of the corpses."³³ But especially after 1971 Nixon's approach proved reasonably effective in one respect: in May of that year US combat deaths averaged 35 a week compared to 200 a week in May 1970,³⁴ and as a result Nixon succeeded in keeping wavering sections of the population from joining the antiwar movement. For the next two decades reliance on proxy armies rather than US troops to fight counterrevolutionary wars was a staple of Washington's policy. But in the short run Vietnamization was incapable of shoring up the ineffectual South Vietnamese Army. To give this beleaguered force a breather as US troops withdrew, Nixon decided that US ground forces were needed for one more massive operation. On April 30, 1970 he announced that US troops, backed by B-52 air strikes, had entered Cambodia in order to destroy "North Vietnamese command posts" and that additional air strikes against North Vietnam were under way.³⁵

Coming after a year of announcements that the war was being de-escalated, Nixon's invasion of Cambodia ignited a firestorm. Protests began within hours and hundreds of thousands took to the streets. Confrontations with police took place from coast to coast and in the next few weeks four white students were killed at Kent State and two Black students at Jackson State; six African Americans were also killed May 11 in Augusta, Georgia, when police fired on a protest against the beating death of a Black man in prison. On May 10 a National Strike Information Center at Brandeis announced that 448 campuses were either striking or shut down: some four million students and 350,000 faculty were taking part in what amounted to a campus general strike. During the first week in May, thirty ROTC buildings were burned or bombed and National Guard units were mobilized on twenty-one campuses in sixteen states.³⁶ Nixon was forced to backtrack and promise withdrawal of troops from Cambodia within thirty days. Indeed, he was so shaken by events that after an emergency antiwar demonstration on May 9 he left the White House nearly alone and mingled with student protesters at the Lincoln Memorial at 4 a.m., talking aimlessly about sports and surfing.³⁷

For the first time there was a large-scale split in the trade union leadership regarding support for the war. And in the military, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, at least 500 GI's deserted every day of May.³⁸ The inner circles of power were also split: 250 State Department employees signed an antiwar protest statement and Henry Kissinger was quoted as saying later, "The very fabric of government was falling apart."³⁹

New Constituencies Mobilize

The May 1970 protests turned out to be the last antiwar actions of such sustained militancy. Likewise, the 1970s did not see further ghetto rebellions on the scale of the 1964–68 uprisings. But even after those convulsions receded, and after SNCC and SDS had collapsed (SNCC slowly but steadily fading from 1968 on; SDS exploding in a spectacular factional battle in June 1969), other indicators of the establishment's vulnerability and the spread of radicalism to new constituencies were on every hand.

To begin with, for the first time since the immediate post-World War II period, the US faced major economic challenge. The costs of the Vietnam War were coming home with a vengeance, other capitalist economies were getting stronger relative to the US, the value of the dollar was plummeting and beginning in 1970 the US balance-of-payments deficit began to spiral out of control.⁴⁰ So on the economic front as well Nixon was forced into a strategic retreat: he imposed wage-price controls and declared that the dollar would no longer be convertible to gold, thus unilaterally abandoning the Bretton Woods world financial structure set up

after World War II. Meanwhile, in the political realm the revelations of the Pentagon Papers in 1971 and then the Watergate crisis – a direct result of the confrontation between a president trying to conduct an increasingly unpopular war against wide opposition – gripped the country from 1972 to August 1974.

The space for radical activity expanded as government authority and credibility eroded. More sophisticated approaches to organizing began to take root in several movements, and activism gained momentum in sectors that had only begun to stir in 1968. Of prime importance, the Black freedom movement continued on a mass level while developing new programs and more advanced organizational expressions. The Black Panther Party – termed in 1968 by J. Edgar Hoover “the greatest [single] threat to the internal security of the country”⁴¹ – reached the height of its influence in 1969–70 and demonstrated that urban Black youth would not only rebel in the streets but flock to a disciplined revolutionary organization. Detroit’s League of Revolutionary Black Workers, launched in 1969 on the basis of in-plant efforts by the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) and similar formations, provided a glimpse of the power wielded by revolutionary-minded African American workers at the point of production.

A host of new Black student organizations also emerged on campus, and hybrid combinations of nationalism and socialism became a powerful ideological force among Black college students. In September 1970 the radical nationalist Congress of Afrikan Peoples was founded in Atlanta by a gathering of 3,500. In 1972 the first African Liberation Day marches – organized by Black anti-imperialists – mobilized 60,000 on May 27, 30,000 in Washington, D.C. alone. Even larger numbers marched in thirty cities on African Liberation Day 1973. In March 1972 the National Black Political Convention in Gary drew 8,000 and formed the National Black Assembly on the basis of a radical program. Historian Manning Marable later termed the gathering “the high point of Black nationalist agitation in the post-World War II period.”⁴²

In the antiwar movement, the October 1969 Vietnam Moratorium involved millions in “the largest public protest against government policy ever seen in the US”;⁴³ and then the November 15, 1969 Washington Mobilization saw 500,000 to 800,000 attend the largest single march (to that point) in US history. In the years after the 1970 Cambodia protests antiwar activism spread to new sectors and in 1971 another Washington, D.C. protest drew half a million on April 24. In the week leading up to that rally Vietnam Veterans Against the War conducted Operation Dewey Canyon III, which included some of the most dramatic moments of the entire antiwar movement. The operation began with a march to Arlington Cemetery of 1,500 vets, wives of dead GI’s and Gold Star mothers, but the iron gates of the national shrine were locked in their faces. That night network TV broadcast interviews with antiwar veterans and the vivid image of a mother in tears after

being denied admission to her son’s burial place. The VVAW actions culminated at the steps of the Capitol with hundreds of veterans tossing their Silver Stars, Navy Crosses, battle ribbons, Purple Hearts, and Bronze Stars over the fence; the ceremony began with an ex-Marine saying “We cast these medals away as a symbol of dishonor, shame and inhumanity.”⁴⁴ By this time VVAW – which had started in the spring of 1967 with a half-dozen members – numbered 11,000 vets, fielded twenty-six regional coordinators, and included a left wing that not only opposed US intervention but called for an outright NLF victory.⁴⁵

A week after the April 24 march, an attempt was made to shut down the government through civil disobedience; these “Mayday” protests resulted in the largest number of arrests (12,614, most later ruled illegal) in US history.⁴⁶ Though less frequently expressed in the form of demonstrations, antiwar sentiment continued to develop during 1972, with new groups – including the Union of Vietnamese in the US, which supported the peace platform of the NLF – adding their voice. The Paris Peace Agreement was finally signed in January 1973; though Nixon and Kissinger tried to pretend otherwise, it ratified the US defeat and marked a huge setback for the strategy of worldwide counterrevolution.

Meanwhile the most important vehicle for enforcing Washington’s will around the world – the US military – was itself experiencing an unprecedented internal rebellion. The first antiwar GI coffeehouse opened in 1968 in Columbia, South Carolina. Soon there were a host of such coffeehouses, and also an explosion of antiwar newspapers aimed at armed services personnel: 227 published at least one issue between 1968 and 1972.⁴⁷ Annual Armed Forces Days began to be marked more by GI antiwar protests than official celebrations, even in cities and towns that had long been bastions of support for the military; it was a true political earthquake, for example, when on May 15, 1971 almost 1,000 people, mostly active-duty GIs from nearby Fort Hood, marched through the streets of Killeen, Texas.

Even more inflammable was the situation on the ground in Vietnam. Army records showed 551 incidents of assaults on superiors with explosive weapons (“fragging”), resulting in 86 deaths, between 1969 and July 1972.⁴⁸ Between August 1969 and April 1972 ten “major” incidents of mutiny occurred and an unrecorded number of “minor” incidents.⁴⁹ The depth of the military’s crisis was revealed not by any radical periodical, but by a US army colonel writing in the June 1971 *Armed Forces Journal*: “By every conceivable indication, the US army in South Vietnam is approaching a state of total collapse, with individuals and units avoiding or having refused combat, murdering their officers, drug-ridden, and dispirited, where not near mutinous ... the morale, discipline and battle-worthiness of the US armed forces are, with a few salient exceptions, lower and worse than at any time in this century and possibly the history of the US.”⁵⁰

While the military was in such crisis, a sector of the population at home whose

youth were being sent to Vietnam in greatly disproportionate numbers was swinging into action. On March 3, 1968 over 1,000 Mexican American students walked out of Lincoln High School in L.A., beginning a series of high school "blow-outs" and strikes that spurred a new generation of Chicanos toward radical activism.⁵¹ That same year saw the founding of the militant Brown Berets and of CASA-Hermanidad General de Trabajadores (Center for Autonomous Social Action - General Brotherhood of Workers), a socialist-led organization based among Mexican workers. March 1969 brought the first-ever National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference, which adopted a manifesto, *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*. A month later Mexican American student leaders founded *El Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán* (MEChA) on the basis of a similar activist and radical platform.

In 1970 the bitterly fought strike and boycott campaign begun by the United Farmworkers in September 1965 culminated in victory, when twenty-six grape growers were forced to sign contracts with UFW leader César Chávez. A month later the watershed Chicano Moratorium mobilized 20,000-plus in the largest anti-war march to that date in Los Angeles history and the biggest-ever anti-Vietnam War march initiated and led by organizations of color. Outrage spread throughout the country's Mexican-American community after county sheriffs and LAPD officers attacked the demonstration and later that day killed three Chicanos, including well-known journalist Rubén Salazar, who was shot while sitting quietly in the Silver Dollar Bar. In the next two years the *La Raza Unida* Party, which had been founded in 1969, spread across the southwest, and for a time appeared to put the radical wing of the Chicano movement on a firm organizational foundation.

The years 1968 and after also saw the birth and rapid development of the Asian American movement.⁵² The Asian American Political Alliance at UC Berkeley, founded in spring 1968, was the first Asian American political formation. (Previous organizations of Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Koreans or other US residents of Asian descent had formed on a nationality-specific basis.) In the summer of 1968 the first nationwide Asian student conference took place, and Asian student groups played important roles in the pivotal fights for ethnic studies at San Francisco State and UC Berkeley. The next several years saw an explosion of Asian American activism, with young activists spotlighting the racist character of the US war in Vietnam, rediscovering community activism and the country's Chinatowns, Japantowns and Manilatowns, and linking up with Asian farmworker militants and left-wing veterans of earlier generations. Revolutionary ideas quickly gained influence, not least because of the prestige of powerful left movements in Asia, including the Communist Parties in Vietnam, China and Korea, the communist-led armed insurgency in the Philippines, and the militant Zengakuren student movement in Japan.

Simultaneously a radical youth movement with substantial community support

developed as part of *El Nuevo Despertar* (the New Awakening) in New York and other centers of the Puerto Rican diaspora.⁵³ Its main expression was the Young Lords Party, which was modeled on the Black Panthers and within a few years of its founding in 1969 had attained a membership and base in the thousands. The radicalization process among Puerto Ricans in the US was intertwined with an expansion and leftward turn in the independence movement on the island, crystallized in the formation of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party (PSP) in 1971. More than 2,000 people participated in the founding meeting of the PSP's US branch in the spring of 1973.

At the very moment when the PSP was raising the banner of Puerto Rican independence in New York City, another revitalized struggle for sovereignty was being waged - by force of arms - half-way across the country. Beginning February 27, 1973, a contingent of America's indigenous people occupied Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota - and for seventy-one days defied a siege by the FBI, local goon squads and federal troops.⁵⁴ A rebirth of Indian activism had been under way since the early 1960s and was catapulted to nationwide prominence by the eighteen-month occupation of Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay, which began in November 1969. But it was the confrontation at Wounded Knee that showed the strength of the alliance that had been built between traditional Indian elders and the younger, mainly urban-based militants of the American Indian Movement (AIM, founded in 1968), as well as the breadth of resistance sentiment throughout the Indian population.

Out of the Prisons, Kitchens and Closets

Inevitably, such ferment among the dispossessed found reflection among those whose chains were not metaphorical but literal. The late 1960s saw the development of a radical movement "behind the walls," as thousands of prisoners became politicized and a prisoner support movement evolved on the outside. George Jackson - whose book, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*, became a bestseller - was one of the movement's most prominent voices. Jackson was killed August 21, 1970 in San Quentin during what authorities claimed was a bungled escape attempt;⁵⁵ the next morning at least 700 inmates at Attica prison in New York, most wearing black armbands, refused to eat breakfast, and there were similar solidarity actions in prisons across the country. Prison protests frequently turned into open revolt, and there were at least sixteen prison rebellions during 1970 alone. The bloodiest confrontation took place in September 1971 at Attica: 1,200 inmates seized control of half the prison and took hostages; negotiations were stonewalled by Governor Nelson Rockefeller; and in the ensuing military assault twenty-nine inmates and ten hostages were killed - every one by gunshot

wounds inflicted by the attacking police. An official commission stated, "With the exception of Indian massacres in the late nineteenth century, the State Police assault which ended the four-day prison uprising was the bloodiest one-day encounter between Americans since the Civil War."⁵⁶

The women's liberation movement erupted in these same years. Developing out of the civil rights movement, the reborn US women's movement held its first nationwide conferences in August and then November 1968. Hundreds of local consciousness-raising and activist groups based on different variants of radical and socialist feminism took shape between 1968 and 1972; and even liberal feminism – expressed via the National Organization for Women (formed in 1966) and *Ms. Magazine* (whose first regular issue appeared in July 1972) – was much further left than it is today.⁵⁷ Establishing the legitimacy and importance of the fight against sexism – among activists as well as in society as a whole – was no easy task. But there was no stopping hundreds of thousands of women from embracing the fight for equality in every sphere of life. And there was no avoiding the fact that women's liberation had added new dimensions to the critique of US society.

One of the most progressive movements of women, however, developed independently of the self-described women's movement. The welfare rights movement, also originating largely out of the civil rights movement, reached its peak in 1969. That year the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), founded in 1967, grew to include 22,500 dues-paying members in 523 chapters. Besides conducting numerous campaigns for greater welfare benefits (many successful), NWRO was an active participant in antiwar and other broad coalitions.⁵⁸

Coming out from behind a different set of barriers, homosexuals in the late 1960s broke through some of society's oldest taboos to forge the modern gay and lesbian movements. A tiny organized campaign for equal rights had existed before 1969, but it was the take-to-the-streets rebellion that followed a New York City police raid on the Stonewall Inn the night of June 27–28, 1969 that opened the path to building a mass movement. Within a few months of Stonewall, Gay Liberation Fronts formed across the country and by 1973 there were more than 800 gay rights organizations in existence.⁵⁹ The dominant current within them advocated that radical, antiracist and anti-imperialist perspectives be considered an integral part of the fight for lesbian and gay rights.

For thousands spurred to explore new ideas by participating in these movements, the amount of radical literature available kept growing by leaps and bounds. The output of left-wing publishing houses expanded and the circulation of underground/opposition newspapers exploded. By summer 1970 the Underground Press Syndicate included 200 papers with six million readers, not counting another 500 underground papers in high schools. Liberation News Service, founded in 1967, kept many of these publications up-to-date on radical activities and analy-

sis – and also supplied photographs, drawings and cartoons – via its weekly packets. The radical filmmaking Newsreel collective added another media dimension to the left beginning in 1968. Scores of new Black community newspapers were launched, and the nationwide *Muhammad Speaks* attained a peak weekly circulation of 650,000 in the early 1970s. Dozens of new Chicano publications appeared, linked together via the radical Chicano Press Association.⁶⁰ A telling gauge of the intellectual mood was the outpouring of radical titles from mainstream publishing houses, ranging from Robert L. Allen's *Black Awakening in Capitalist America* (Doubleday) to Felix Greene's *The Enemy: What Every American Should Know About Imperialism* and Huey Newton's *To Die for the People* (both from Random House).⁶¹ It is especially noteworthy that publication of radical books did not slack off after 1970 but continued at a steady pace for several more years.

Shaking the Empire

Beyond the US borders, it wasn't just Vietnam that gave Washington strategists nightmares. When at the beginning of 1968 North Korea seized the *USS Pueblo* and held its crew as spies, the US was too overextended to do anything but issue an apology (quickly renounced) in order to get the sailors back. In October the Mexican government, faced with a rising student protest movement and fearing embarrassment at the upcoming Olympic Games in Mexico City, turned to armed repression and massacred at least 300 students at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas. Many activists who survived left for rural areas to form armed guerrilla movements.

Two weeks later, on October 18, Tommie Smith and John Carlos gave the Black Power salute while receiving their Olympic medals, generating one of the most powerful images of the entire decade. Seen by tens of millions, this action – added to the defiant posture of world heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali, "the warrior saint in the revolt of the Black athlete in America" – brought radical protest into the previously off-limits realm of mainstream sports.⁶² The landmark Medellín conference of Catholic bishops also took place in 1968; it called for social justice under the banner of Liberation Theology, giving a boost to grassroots movements throughout the continent and propelling many people of faith to the left.

In Northern Ireland a new movement for Catholic civil rights emerged beginning in 1968; after a series of police attacks on Catholic communities, by August 1969 the Six Counties were immersed in a virtual civil war and for over a month the Catholic ghettos in Derry and Belfast were barricaded and "no-go" areas for British troops and Protestant armed units. At the time of the French May 1968 general strike, "there were significant demonstrations of solidarity in Mexico City, Berlin, Tokyo, Buenos Aires, Berkeley and Belgrade, and students and workers in

both Spain and Uruguay attempted general strikes of their own. Massive student strikes in Italy forced Prime Minister Aldo Moro and his cabinet to resign; Germany experienced its worst political crisis since World War II; and a student strike at the University of Dakar, Senegal, led to a general strike of workers.⁶³ Across Western Europe, tens of thousands of young "1968ers" flocked into anticapitalist organizations or formed new ones. Right on the US northern border, the fight for an independent Québec – within which revolutionary socialists held considerable influence – heated up. The Canadian government had to impose an emergency War Measures Act in October 1970 to suppress the movement.

In 1970 Uruguay's Tupamaros kidnapped CIA agent Dan Mitrione. Before he was executed Mitrione revealed the sordid details of US interference in Uruguay's affairs. (In 1973 the Mitrione story reached a mass US audience via Constantino Costa-Gavras' film *State of Siege*). In the Philippines 1971 opened with a "first quarter storm" of protest against the US-backed Marcos regime, and Marcos declared martial law in September 1972 to beat back rising dissent. In Chile, the Popular Unity (UP) coalition of the Socialist and Communist Parties won a three-way contest for the presidency on September 4, 1971. Salvador Allende assumed office only to be faced with a CIA-organized destabilization campaign that culminated in the bloody 1973 coup.

In the Middle East, the Palestinian movement began to get worldwide attention and support as the Israeli occupation of the territories seized in 1967 continued and the PLO began to articulate its program before the international community; this national liberation struggle started to gain a new level of support. In Africa, armed struggle against Portuguese colonialism gathered strength in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau. Amílcar Cabral, Marxist leader of the liberation movement in Guinea-Bissau, visited the US several times to address bodies ranging from the UN General Assembly to gatherings of Black activists, where his views made a deep impression.

No wonder policy-makers in Washington felt beleaguered – and young activists were energized by the feeling that they were part of a rising worldwide movement.

Worker Militancy

A surge of labor militancy sufficient to alter the political thinking of both new radicals and government policy-makers took shape in 1969–70. After a postwar record for strikes was set in 1969, 1970 upped the ante further with 381 major work stoppages involving 2,468,000 workers.⁶⁴ Among the sharpest confrontations were a nationwide strike against General Electric that sparked support actions on dozens of campuses; a Post Office walkout during which US troops were called out to sort

the mail, and a two-month strike against General Motors, the longest auto walkout since 1946. And at least on the local level, there were a growing number of cases where unionists welcomed the support, and even considered the ideas, of student and ex-student radicals.

In Detroit the League of Revolutionary Black Workers built a strong enough base to seriously worry the United Auto Workers leadership and the city's power structure.⁶⁵ And in 1971–72 militant job actions and strikes shook General Motors' most productive auto plant at Lordstown, Ohio, indicating a new mood of combativity and even radicalism spreading among the young, white workers (including many Vietnam vets) typical of the Lordstown workforce. A few ties even developed between radical workplace organizers in the US and their counterparts in Italy, where "Hot Autumn" 1969 had not only seen the third largest strike wave in Western Europe in the twentieth century (behind May 1968 in France and the British General Strike of 1926) but numerous alliances between young workers and student radicals.⁶⁶ Under these conditions it did not seem very surprising that a president representing the free-market Republican Party would resort to wage-price controls; or that young organizers would envision revolutionary politics gaining influence in the US working class.

1969: Implosion and Fadeout?

Later chapters will detail the ways in which those who turned to Marxism tried to make their revolutionary vision come true. For the moment, the main point is the tremendous ferment under way among the dispossessed. Without placing the upsurges of 1968–73 in the Black, Chicano, Asian American, Puerto Rican and American Indian communities, as well as among women and lesbians and gays, at the center of analysis; and without grasping the links between those movements and the upheavals in the armed forces, the prisons, among welfare recipients, on many shop floors and among urban youth – it is simply impossible to grasp those years' political dynamics and the reasons that revolutionary ideas gained such a following.

Yet it is these very movements – in particular the movements of peoples of color – that the "good sixties/bad sixties" school ignores, focusing almost exclusively on the ebb and flow of activism among white radicals in and around SDS. Todd Gitlin's *The Sixties* is a prime example: his climactic chapters on 1969 and 1970 – just the years when some of the most important movements noted above were gaining momentum – are entitled "Implosion" and "Fadeout."⁶⁷ Both chapters put SDS and its Weatherman faction – which in 1970 went underground to pursue armed struggle – at the center of analysis. Other components of the emerging revolutionary current, with the partial exception of the women's movement,

are included only as background, if they are mentioned at all. The turn taken by many prominent figures out of the New Left to apocalyptic rhetoric and small group violence is taken both as the central development of late-sixties activism and as the main culprit in destroying a once promising New Left.

It is certainly true that such tendencies were a noteworthy part of that era's political drama. Violence – termed “as American as cherry pie” by SNCC leader H. Rap Brown – was showing up more often than cherry pie on television screens and in everyday life.⁶⁸ From one side came the ongoing violence perpetrated in Vietnam and the ever-increasing repression of dissidents at home. From the other came explosions of mass frustration such as the 1964–68 Black rebellions and, post-1968, the “trashing” of property and rock-throwing of mainly white antiwar demonstrators. But at the end of the decade a different type of protest violence entered the mix: attacks on war-related or other establishment institutions by small groups, using firebombs or other such means, planned in advance rather than bursting out spontaneously during mass demonstrations.

In spring 1968 there were 10 bombings on campuses; in fall 1968, 41; between spring 1969 and May 1970 at least 250.⁶⁹ A big dose of inflated rhetoric accompanied many of these acts, and not only from advocates of “picking up the gun” within SDS or certain sections of the African American movement. Inevitably, violent incidents and apocalyptic rhetoric received a greatly disproportionate share of media attention, not least because the powers-that-be were eager to paint the radical movement as a mindless destructive force. (Ironically, the best single chronicle of how the media systematically distorted the nature of 1960s protest movements remains Todd Gitlin's first book, *The Whole World Is Watching*.⁷⁰)

The portrayal of small-group violence as the essence of radicalism reached a peak in the wake of the two most notorious radical bombings of the period, the Townhouse explosion March 6, 1970 in New York City in which three members of the Weatherman group were killed when their bomb-making workshop exploded; and the destruction by the Weather Underground-like New Year's Gang of the Army Mathematics Research Center at the University of Wisconsin, Madison on August 24, 1970, in which a graduate student who was working at night was accidentally killed. Numerous books and articles have identified one or the other of these incidents as symbolizing the end of the sixties and – explicitly or implicitly – the dead-end nature of the era's experiment with revolution.

One strand of the New Left did ebb after those bombings – and, probably more important, after the Cambodia upheaval (which took place halfway between them), Nixon's hasty retreat, and his subsequent acceleration of US troop withdrawals. Militancy declined among a layer of college students, overwhelmingly white, whose activism rose and fell in almost direct proportion to the size of draft calls and the number of US troops deployed in Vietnam. The later chapters of

Gitlin's *The Sixties* paint a vivid picture of the rage and frustration that swelled up within this sector between 1968 and 1970. That frustration led many activists to adopt distorted, apocalyptic perspectives. And, as Gitlin points out, it led to tension and conflict as the earlier sense of all activists simply being part of “the movement” gave way to bitter doctrinal disputes and factional maneuvering. It became more and more difficult for activists from different tendencies to maintain personal friendships, and all aspects of political life acquired an abrasive edge.

Many activists felt a deep sense of loss, even trauma, in these changes – but it is still one-sided to analyze the late 1960s principally through the prism of this experience. The downturn in militancy among white college students after 1970, and the turn to underground organization and bombing taken by a few, remain only one part of a much bigger story. Even within the ranks of white students who had turned to revolutionary politics, the armed-struggle-now course attracted only a (vocal) minority. Most shared a belief in “revolution in our lifetime” (as the saying went) but not tomorrow; the majority view was cogently expressed in 1970 by the *Guardian*: “Neither objective nor subjective conditions exist in America to create a revolutionary situation at this moment. But conditions do exist to raise the political consciousness of millions and millions ... in preparation for developing a mass revolutionary movement....”⁷¹

Most young white organizers believed that the key task was to reach out to those millions. Beyond that, the more important developments were outside the sector of white student or ex-student revolutionaries altogether: the spread of radical ideas and organization to ever more diverse constituencies, a process that continued for several more years. However neat the symbolism seems, the radical surge of the 1960s did not end with a bomb blast in the spring or summer of 1970.

A Broad Base of Revolutionary Sentiment

The new revolutionary current that emerged in 1968–73 was too broadly based for any single event to halt its initial momentum. Ideas about revolution had spread widely among youth of color, penetrated deeply into the predominantly white counterculture, moved central to debate on college and university campuses. This breadth meant, among other things, that for people to identify themselves as political revolutionaries and set their life's priorities accordingly had a recognized social standing. In contrast to the situation today, being a revolutionary in 1968–73 did not translate into being stamped with the label of ideological oddball or social misfit. In many cases it was considered a sign that an individual had strong sense of social responsibility, and gave that person a positive standing within his or her immediate community. This respect in turn gave the revolutionary effort strength and self-confidence.

The new revolutionaries were also undismayed by an examination of their own social composition. Most recognized that their ranks consisted disproportionately of individuals emerging from the intelligentsia and middle classes. This reflected the pivotal role college students had played in almost all the sixties protest movements, and was consistent with long-established patterns in the growth of radical movements worldwide. At the same time, there were numerous people from working class backgrounds intermingled with their middle class comrades.

The 1960s saw a massive expansion in the number of working class youth gaining access to higher education and this layer was well represented within the radical ranks. Many were the first members of their family to attend college; they frequently felt responsible to "give back to the community" and immersed themselves in efforts to stop the war (in which a disproportionate number of working class kids were dying), end poverty and combat racism. And especially in communities of color, numbers of working class youth who had never set foot on a college campus were attracted to revolutionary ideas. Furthermore, though its component parts tended to be divided along racial lines, in its overall composition the emerging revolutionary current was one of the most racially diverse on the political map. Few doubted that a tremendous amount of work lay ahead before the insurgent ranks fully reflected the social layers with the greatest stake in fundamental change. But the notion that those taking up this challenge were all white and middle class is a latter-day myth.

Another important factor was the huge amount of time and energy these young people devoted to "doing politics" and their willingness to sacrifice. The "put your body on the line" tradition of the New Left ran strong in this group. And the new radicals were inevitably influenced by the fact that they had come to adulthood just as mass movements were growing spectacularly and winning important victories. Like earlier generations, they tended to make unwarranted historical generalizations from their own experience, in this case believing that social change could come quickly if only activists brought sufficient determination to the task. Such a voluntarist view of politics would get the 1968 generation into a lot of political trouble, especially after the surge of the late 1960s/early 1970s died down. But during those explosive years this spirit produced a tremendous outpouring of energy and brought out many of these individuals' finest qualities.

Further, economic conditions were favorable for young people to engage in a mammoth amount of volunteer activism during 1968–73. Jobs were relatively plentiful and rents were low. It was common for three, four or five activists to share a household and survive on the wages of one or two working full- or even part-time. It was also relatively inexpensive to conduct political campaigns, and sufficient funds could be raised via small contributions from the organizers themselves and their immediate social base. This stands in sharp contrast to the 1980s–1990s

pattern of dependence on wealthy individuals or foundations for the money to staff progressive organizations. This was a crucial factor underlying the growth of organizational forms that had an activist rather than just paper membership: the radical formations of the time generally operated with a large proportion of the membership volunteering huge quantities of time, and were not dependent on a handful of full-time paid staff.

More Complex Challenges on the Agenda

Although they did not create a revolutionary or prerevolutionary situation, the clashes of 1968–1973 did drastically change the US political terrain. Protest had spilled out beyond traditional channels and demands that required more than reforming the existing social arrangement had widespread support. The established centers of power could no longer completely control events. The masses of "everyday people" had stepped onto the political stage as independent actors. Radicalism was no longer a fanciful notion promoted by a few voices on the fringes – it had gotten a foothold in the mainstream.

This changed terrain confronted organizers with more complex challenges than they had faced earlier in the decade. The end of legal segregation had been a major blow to entrenched power and as such was resisted with violence, but by 1964–65 all but the most reactionary recognized that adjusting to this change presented fewer dangers to the system than further resisting it. Similarly, the existence of any kind of peace movement was highly unwelcome to the foreign policy establishment, but as long as such a movement expressed no sympathy for "the other side" it could be tolerated. But in the late 1960s those boundaries had been crossed. The fight against racism began to pose demands that targeted the structural roots of inequality. Qualms about the war in Vietnam turned into challenges to the core principles of US foreign policy and even to expressions of solidarity with "the enemy."

Beyond that, the critiques of domestic inequality and foreign policy began to be connected both intellectually and in the practice of mass movements. No longer were dissidents mainly calling for the US to live up to the noble ideas upon which the US was supposedly based. Voices were raised arguing that the true history of the US and the private-profit system did not reflect those ideals in the first place. Hundreds of thousands of people, with a broader base numbering in the millions, were taking to the streets and considering views of social change that went well beyond reform. Within the protest movements there were thousands who self-consciously saw themselves as revolutionaries and who were prepared to devote their lives to that goal. All the key institutions of US capitalism had taken some kind of beating and were under overwhelming pressure to change in some way.

US hegemony in the capitalist world was eroding and Washington's capacity to get its way in the Third World was being seriously undermined. It seemed to observers of many political persuasions that the squeeze on the US international empire was going to continue, and to exacerbate the class, racial and ideological fault-lines that had opened up at home.

As it turned out, major structural changes in capitalism were indeed just around the corner. Analysts from all quarters now target the early 1970s as marking the end of the long postwar economic boom and the beginning of a new phase in capitalist development.⁷² (Among other things, US workers' average weekly earnings – adjusted for inflation – rose through the 1950s and 1960s, peaked in 1973, and declined from there through the mid-1990s, when they again began to rise slightly.⁷³) But the specific contours of the new phase conformed only in part to the predictions of that time – and did not turn out to be nearly as conducive to the left's growth as the revolutionary wing of the 1968 generation had thought. Rather than ushering in a period of general (if uneven and difficult) progressive advance, the 1970s economic restructuring spurred (and was spurred by) a conservative revival that, at the end of the decade, was crowned with Ronald Reagan's ascent to the presidency.

But in 1968 Reaganism was far in the future. Between 1968 and 1973 thousands of young people anticipated big changes ahead and dedicated themselves to shaping those changes in a revolutionary direction. The questions that then preoccupied them were the classic ones facing revolutionaries: What is the most effective way to bring revolution about? What kinds of ideology, strategy, organization and practical activity provide the best ways to advance the revolutionary cause? The sense of urgency and polemical fury that gripped these young revolutionaries as they confronted these questions is ridiculed today. But that fervor was fundamentally a measure of how seriously the young radicals took their task and how closely they felt their efforts were bound up with the sufferings and aspirations of peoples across the globe. For thousands and even tens of thousands, "the system" had become the target, and making revolution had become the most important thing in their lives.