

# 1968-2008 from the US: "Looking Back — and Ahead"

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THE YEAR 1968 stands out as one of those pivotal years on multiple political and cultural levels. *Against the Current* will devote considerable space to discussing what the upheavals of that year meant then, and now. Conventional media retrospectives will concentrate on the spectacular and appalling visual images — street rioting over the Vietnam War and the Martin Luther King assassination; the murder of Robert Kennedy; the debacle of the Democratic convention in Chicago, with police beating heads while Hubert Humphrey proclaimed "the politics of joy" in his nomination acceptance speech.

All these events are real and worth recalling — but there were other developments of at least equal longterm significance, and two particularly important lessons to be remembered as we enter 2008 and look toward a new political period. Historian and activist Michael Honey opened our own year of reflection on the 1968 events in our previous issue (ATC 132), in a feature interview recalling Dr. King's final campaign in support of the Memphis sanitation workers — a struggle in which he sacrificed his life.

What do we see as the critical lessons of 1968? First: What tens of thousands of activists in the streets in 1968 had learned from bitter experience — as hard as the Eugene McCarthy "peace" campaign worked to disguise it — was that the Democratic Party is a party of imperialism and repression.

From the Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961 to the crushing of democracy in the Dominican Republic in 1965 to the holocaust in Vietnam, there had been eight years of imperial adventures and brutalities by the Kennedy-Johnson administrations. For today's new antiwar generation, given that the current catastrophes in Iraq, Afghanistan and now Pakistan are seen as the work of the imperial-messianic Bush presidency, the real politics of the Democrats are not necessarily as clearly exposed as they need to be.

Second: While 1968 was a year of upheaval and of inspiring struggles both large and small, it wasn't marked by massive immediate victories. The Vietnam war, utterly discredited in the eyes of the American people and the world, would last another seven years. Although the Memphis strikers won their union contract, Dr. King's Poor People's Campaign would largely crumble after his death. The year which began with Lyndon Johnson driven from office would end with the election of Richard Nixon — the most criminal Chief Executive in U.S. history until his records were surpassed by Ronald Reagan and ultimately George W. Bush.

The fruits of the 1968 struggles, however, were reaped by victories in succeeding years that would never have been possible without '68 — the gains of affirmative action for African Americans,

Latinos and women and for African- American political power in the South, the expansion of social programs, abortion rights and broader reproductive freedoms, gay and lesbian rights and more. Reforms were gained through struggles that threatened to go beyond the limits of reform itself — even if today, many of these battles for basic human rights must now be fought and won yet again. And this lesson holds not only in the United States, but internationally.

## **From “Stability” to Global Turbulence**

Most important, 1968 marked the end of the long post-World War II world capitalist boom, along with the twin illusions of permanent stability and unchallenged U.S. power. The former was rocked by the near-revolutionary May-June student and worker upheaval in France, the latter by the Tet Offensive of the National Liberation Front in Vietnam. It was also the year of the first large-scale challenge to Stalinist rule in Eastern Europe since the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 — the “Prague Spring” in Czechoslovakia.

Did they win? No: The French revolt was contained, as the strength of bourgeois institutions and the weight of reformist labor bureaucracies proved much stronger than the revolutionary left had anticipated. As for the all-out insurrectionary attempt by the NLF, ordered by its North Vietnamese overseers, this was actually a military disaster that wiped out many thousands of Communist cadres in the south of Vietnam. Yet it obliterated the American government’s promises of “victory around the corner,” revealed the U.S. army’s accelerating disintegration, forced Lyndon Johnson out of the White House and assured the eventual defeat of U.S. power in Indochina.

In Czechoslovakia, reform leaders in the Communist Party held sway until August 21, when the Soviet army swept in and crushed the movement. It was a profound tragedy that inaugurated twenty final years of a bureaucratic Dark Age — yet this also marked the moment when even the Stalinist rulers in Eastern Europe pretty much lost the last semblance of belief in their own system. There was also a brief student democracy movement in Poland that year. Quickly suppressed in isolation from the working class, this stirring helped set the stage for a strike movement of Polish dockworkers in 1970-71, which in turn foreshadowed the Solidarnosc upheaval a decade later.

The Mexico City Olympics of 1968 were marked, first, by the army’s mass slaughter of hundreds of students demonstrating in the city center the week before the Games opened. This massacre did not disturb the ceremonial splendor of the torch lighting, the athletic spectacle or the complacency of American triumphalism — it was as-yet undreamed that the U.S. men’s basketball team could actually lose a game (that wouldn’t happen until 1972). Then, suddenly lighting up the night on the medal podium, sprinters John Carlos and Tommie Smith, inspired by the human rights sports activist Harry Edwards, gave their glove-fisted Black Power salute.

Carlos and Smith would pay a heavy price for their bravery, but this defiant gesture tore a giant hole in the shamateur-athletic façade built up by the head of the U.S. Olympic Committee, the vicious racist and onetime Hitler-admiring Avery Brundage, according to which the athletes were to be grateful and submissive in their poverty while the bureaucracies lived large, and above all silent on issues of politics and social justice.

Indeed, the U.S. sporting world that year saw another expression of “cultural revolution” almost forgotten now, but scandalous at the time: Before a World Series game in Detroit, singer-guitarist José Feliciano performed a soul-and-Latino-inflected rendition of the national anthem, concluding with a quiet and impeccably tasteful improvised cadenza. Forty years later, it is difficult to comprehend that the backlash almost wrecked Feliciano’s career.

Black Power, however, was far more than cultural. It was political, and initiated a transformation in urban politics in which the white monopoly over city administrations along with their police forces, fire departments and control over contracts and appointments, would be broken. The potential for this positive change to produce a break from the Democratic Party and a new, independent Black-led politics in America would remain unfulfilled even today.

### Second Wave Feminism and Beyond

Among all the movements of the late 1960s, none would have a more lasting impact than Women's Liberation. This eruption arose in part from women rooted in Civil Rights and New Left activism, refusing to accept the subordination and sexist abuse they encountered in movements where one prominent male leader either jokingly or ironically declared, in response to a question about the position of women in his organization, "prone."

The feminist revolt within the Movement intersected with the broader social transformation within the economy, with women increasingly entering the work force, achieving an unprecedented degree of economic independence and options about whether and when to marry and/or bear children, and ultimately challenging the previously taken-for-granted reserving of the highest-paying industrial jobs for men only. (Some of their leverage in this struggle derived from the provisions of the 1965 Civil Rights Act, where equal rights for women had been inserted by Southern legislators hoping that this would kill the bill.)

It soon became evident that wide sectors of women in society were increasingly acting "as feminists," even if most of them would have indignantly rejected the label. Given the lasting importance of this development for consciousness and social relations, ATC has asked a number of women who were active in that period to comment on their experiences. We present some of these elsewhere in this issue, as our annual appreciation of International Women's Day as well as part of our 1968 retrospective.

## Looking Forward

Looking to 2008 and beyond, it's worth repeating the salient point that many struggles of 1968 were more important as investments in the future than for their immediate payoffs. This is particularly relevant as regards the antiwar movement. Few of the activists of 1968 thought that the Vietnam war would not only last till '75, but would consume more lives and bring more ecological devastation to that country after '68 than it had before.

Today, the war in Iraq — already an imperialist debacle and a huge defeat for the Bush II gang — is turning into a combination of a protracted occupation and a "low-intensity conflict," the technical term for a war that claims relatively few casualties among the occupiers while devastating those under occupation.

The Democratic leadership barely even dissents from the administration's claims of "progress" in Iraq, except to suggest a "post-surge redeployment" of U.S. troops into the quagmire of Afghanistan. As for any pressure from either party on the Israeli state to end the near-genocidal blockade of Gaza, let alone the daily strangulation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, don't even dream of it.

The Democrats' success in effectively choking people's hopes for ending the war in Iraq produces the temptation to "move on" and devote energy to other matters, particularly the spectacle of the national election. As this statement is written, national attention is gripped by the emergence of Barack Obama, who makes every attempt to distance himself from political Black Power even as he represents its fruition in bourgeois politics.

Now, if it should turn out that the Bush and Clinton family political dynasties both die out the same year, we wish a hearty good-riddance-and-don't-come-back to both. Yet if Barack Obama does prove to have the staying power to gain his party's presidential nomination, it would have an ironic double meaning, as Malik Miah argued in our previous issue. It would be both a kind of completion of the vision articulated in Dr. King's 1963 "I Have a Dream" address, and a triumph of the appearance over the substance of change. The genuine enthusiasm he inspires among young people, communities of color and everyone looking for positive "change" contrasts strikingly with Senator Obama's come-from-behind transformation from community activist and political upstart to a thoroughly conventional Democrat.

Taking a lesson from the upheavals of 1968, we want to urge that activists maintain a focus on the central issues and "the long haul." About the time this statement reaches our readers, for example, the Iraq Veterans Against War and IVAW's allies will be holding the March "Winter Soldier" investigations where the real lives and experiences of military combatants in Iraq will be on display. Don't expect the corporate media, or Democratic politicians, to give this event the coverage it deserves to counter the myths of the "success of the surge" and "declining insurgency."

The antiwar movement, through all its means of communication — town meetings, the internet, all manner of alternative media — needs to get the real stories soldiers tell to the people of our country and the world. That was a big part of how the truths of Vietnam finally broke through.

The year 2008, unlike 1968, will not be a high point of social struggle but in one respect at least may be even more dramatic. Signs increasingly point to severe economic turbulence and possible recession for the U.S. economy, with global implications. Along with the failing U.S. housing market, declining dollar and rising oil prices come fears of a revival of the "stagflation" bouts that plagued the 1970s.

Taken together with Iraq and the spreading regional disaster from Palestine to Pakistan, an economic crisis will complete the discrediting and burial of the Bush regime. The question of whether this can result in anything more than an alternation of power from one party of corporate profit and U.S. empire to another depends, in part, on what the movements on the ground do now.

## **Letter from the Editors**

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### **P.S.**

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