

HISTORICAL ANNIVERSARIES

1968 Plus 50 Years: The Irony of History

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With half a century of hindsight, 1968 appears less a global turning point than an example of one of history's signal features—irony.

Particular calendar years in modern history have the reputation of being exceptional—twelve-month periods in which the turmoil and upheaval were so great that they changed the world. At the top of the list stands 1789, the year of the French Revolution, the first and most enduringly important such upheaval. Also included are 1848, when liberal revolutions that ultimately failed erupted across Europe; 1989, when communism in Central and Eastern Europe collapsed; and 2011, which witnessed the fall of governments across the Middle East that became known as the Arab Spring.

The year 1968 belongs in this company. Between January and December of that year, in East Asia, Eastern and Western Europe, and North America, the crack of the tectonic plates of history shifting sharply seemed almost audible. It was—or at least at the time seemed to be—“the year that rocked the world,” as the subtitle of a recent book put it.¹ Now the golden anniversary of 1968 has arrived. Seen from this perspective, the year appears less a global turning point than an example of one of history's signal features—irony, which is present when the outcome of individual acts and national policies turns out to be quite different from what it initially seemed to be, and from what the people involved in them intended.

As 1968 began, the United States had been fighting in Vietnam for five years, during which 20,000 Americans had died. In the course of that year American troop strength reached its high point of 550,000. A vocal antiwar movement was staging protests against the conflict across the

country, mainly on college campuses. A Democratic senator, Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota, declared his candidacy, on an antiwar platform, for his party's presidential nomination in opposition to the incumbent Lyndon Johnson. Johnson's government assured the public that, unexpectedly protracted though it was proving to be, the United States was in the process of winning the war against the Vietnamese communists, who controlled the northern part of the country and were fighting to take possession of the south as well.

Then, on the last day of January, on the occasion of the Lunar New Year known to the Vietnamese as Tet, the communists launched a massive surprise attack on 36 provincial capitals and five major cities across South Vietnam. Communist forces even appeared on the grounds of the American embassy in Saigon. American and South Vietnamese troops fought them off: An estimated 50,000 communist fighters were killed, missing, or captured. Yet what became known as the Tet Offensive proved to be a major victory for the communist side because of its impact on American public opinion. It demonstrated that, contrary to the assurances of President Johnson and his senior foreign policy officials, the United States was not close to victory in Vietnam.

In the months that followed, the American public turned against the war. In March, McCarthy came stunningly close to defeating Johnson in the first presidential primary election in New Hampshire. Johnson announced that he would not stand for re-election and began negotiations with the communists. His Republican successor, Richard Nixon, wound down the American troop presence. In 1975, when all the American soldiers had left, a North Vietnamese military offensive conquered the south and united the country under communist rule.

The principal victors of Vietnam appeared, at first, to be the American antiwar movement, which had seemed to have forced a reversal of national policy on the war, and the communist side, which derived a major political benefit from the Tet Offensive and went on to win the war. A half century later the balance sheet from 1968 looks, ironically, different.

Despite the efforts of the antiwar movement, American troops continued fighting in Vietnam for four years thereafter. Indeed, it is arguable that the American combat role continued because of the antiwar movement. For while the war became increasingly unpopular in

the United States, that movement—associated in the public mind with disorder, lawbreaking, and anti-Americanism—became even more unpopular. President Richard Nixon used the protests as a foil to generate support for his policy of withdrawing American troops gradually, rather than immediately as the war’s most vocal opponents demanded. Moreover, while the United States did lose the war—its ally and client, the Republic of South Vietnam, was defeated and disappeared—America ended the conflict with its position in East Asia strengthened rather than weakened by virtue of the rapprochement with the People’s Republic of China engineered by the antiwar movement’s *bete noire*, the same President Nixon.

As for the Vietnamese communists, they did achieve their goal of bringing the entire country under their control. Having done so, however, they found themselves at odds with their erstwhile ally but historic adversary, China, which invaded and occupied a slice of northern Vietnam in 1978. Nor did the reunified country prosper, and so the communist bureaucrats followed the Chinese pattern and introduced free-market reforms, borrowing the economic ideas and institutions of the system—global capitalism—that communism was created to oppose. By 2018, with a rapidly growing China bidding to dominate all of East Asia, communist Vietnam had entered into something like a military alliance with the only country capable of offsetting Chinese power: the United States. Having evicted the American navy from Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam’s deepwater port, in 1975, 41 years later the Vietnamese government welcomed it back in the form of the USS John S. McCain, a ship named for the Commander-in-Chief of the Navy’s Pacific Command during the war between the two countries. His son, also named John S. McCain and by then a member of the United States Senate, had spent six years, between 1967 and 1973, incarcerated and tortured in the notorious “Hanoi Hilton,” where the communists kept American prisoners of war. It would be difficult to find a purer case of historical irony than the long-term results of the Vietnam War.

As winter turned to spring in 1968, the world’s attention shifted to Europe. Students launched protest demonstrations at the University of Nanterre, in a suburb of Paris. The authorities responded harshly and anger at their response helped to spread the demonstrations to the heart of the capital. Students there refused to attend classes and occupied university buildings. The police cracked down on them as

well, leading to more demonstrations and occupations. Then, on May 13, French workers went on strike; ultimately an estimated ten million walked off their jobs.

France has a storied tradition of revolutionary upheavals, going back to 1789 and continuing through 1830, when one monarchy was overthrown and replaced by another; the aforementioned 1848; and 1871, when, in the wake of the nation's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and the civil strife that followed, citizens of Paris formed a radical commune that governed the city, after a fashion, for several months. Because of that tradition, because some of the striking workers belonged to communist-dominated unions, because some of the more active students had far-Left political agendas, and because Marxist rhetoric infused the rhetoric of students of all political stripes, that historical pattern seemed to be repeating itself during what came to be known as *les événements de mai-juin* (the events of May and June).

The government of 78-year-old President Charles de Gaulle—an old regime if ever there was one, considering that he had been a French army officer during the First World War and led the anti-German Free French Movement in the Second—appeared to be on the brink of falling. De Gaulle himself fled, unexpectedly and without explanation, to a French military base in Germany.

In the end, however, his government survived. It awarded the striking workers generous pay raises and they returned to work. The student strikes and demonstrations petered out; and even at their height, and even with the violence involved, the demonstrations had more of a festive air than a menacing one. Over five decades, the episode has remained a cultural touchstone for those who took part in it, who became known as the *soixante-huitards*, the generation of 1968. Seen through memory's haze, *les événements* have entered French history as a chapter of bravery and romantic radicalism, a cross between an insurrection and a glorious outdoor party. Perhaps the most enduring mementoes of that spring are the colorful, clever, silk-screened posters that Parisian art students produced by the hundreds, and some memorable slogans, one of which captured the mischievously playful spirit that inspired many of the students: "*Je suis marxiste, tendance Groucho.*" (I am a Marxist—a Groucho Marxist.)

In the subsequent half century two major trends have dominated French public life: the ongoing process of European economic integration culminating in 2002 in the establishment of a common European currency, the euro; and the effort to achieve robust economic growth, both to satisfy the desires of the French public and to maintain political and economic parity with France's enemy-turned-partner, Germany. As a passionate champion of French national grandeur, de Gaulle was resolutely committed to keeping up with Germany, but he never believed in surrendering French sovereignty to a supranational body. In the decades after 1968 France abandoned de Gaulle's vision of its national future. By 2018 France had fallen well behind Germany, had joined the euro, and was attempting, through its president, Emmanuel Macron, born in 1977—almost a decade after *les événements*—to create powerful European Union-wide institutions that would absorb even more of the sovereign prerogatives of Europe's historic nation-states. As for the students who had taken to the streets in the spring of 1968, in the many speeches they made and the manifestoes they issued neither of these two subsequently dominant issues played any significant part.

A few months after the Paris events, 500 miles to the east in Prague, the capital of Czechoslovakia, another defining episode of 1968 took place. For the previous two decades the country had had an orthodox communist government, imposed by the Soviet Union, whose troops occupied Czechoslovakia in the course of their battle against Nazi Germany in World War II. At the beginning of 1968 the communist leader, Antonin Novotny, an orthodox Stalinist, was removed from office and replaced by Alexander Dubcek, a little known party functionary of Slovak origin who had lived for several years in the Soviet Union. The new leader turned out to hold two extraordinary ideas: One was that communist rule was compatible with central features of Western democracy, especially freedom of expression. The other was that as he reformed the Czech communist system to make it freer, the Soviet leaders—who had, he believed, every reason to trust him—would not interfere. Both beliefs, as the events of August 1968 would show, were unfounded.

Dubcek lifted censorship in the country. The Czech press exploded with stories of corruption among Communist Party leaders and criticism of the policies of the Soviet Union. Groups dedicated to discussing and addressing the country's ills proliferated. Czech youth adopted Western

styles of dress and embraced Western music, both of which were forbidden to their counterparts in other communist countries. The cultural and political flowering centered on the capital and became known as the “Prague Spring.”

The leaders of the other communist countries grew increasingly concerned about what was happening, fearing that the spirit of liberty would spread from the Czechs to the people they governed and subvert their own rule. Dubcek assured them that he had matters under control and that his country would remain a faithful member of the communist bloc. In the last week in August, however, the Soviet Union spearheaded an invasion of Czechoslovakia from four directions. Soviet tanks put an end to the Prague spring.

In so doing they put an end to the most elaborate experiment in the political reform of European communism ever attempted. A poster that appeared after the invasion depicted Lenin, the leader of the communist revolution in Russia and the founder of modern communism, weeping. The idea the poster expressed, that Lenin had envisioned a very different kind of communism than the harsh totalitarian system that his acolytes and successors had actually built and would have supported what Dubcek was trying to do, died in the streets of Prague. Thereafter the term “communist idealism” became an oxymoron. The system, it became clear, could only change by collapsing; and 21 years after the tanks rolled into Czechoslovakia that is exactly what occurred. Attempting to preserve communism in 1968, the Soviet leaders doomed it.

While Prague held the world’s attention that year, however, the events that would determine communism’s long-term fate—that would lead, that is, to its demise—were taking place in neighboring Poland. There, too, students demonstrated—on a very modest scale—in protest against existing political conditions. There, too, their efforts came to naught. The communist government’s campaign to suppress them included one of the oldest and ugliest themes in European history, anti-Semitism.

The students recognized that, by themselves, they had no hope of standing up to the Moscow-supported regime in Warsaw, and ten years later they helped to forge a broader, more powerful anti-government coalition that included Polish workers and the Catholic Church as well. That coalition stood behind the free trade union, Solidarity, which

emerged in 1979. Repressed by the communist authorities in 1982, it moved underground and resurfaced in 1989, when it forced the establishment of the first non-communist government in Eastern Europe since World War II, a crucial development in the sequence of events that finally destroyed communism in Europe. In 1968 the Prague Spring got all the attention but, in yet another irony, it was the events in Poland that set in motion the developments that changed the course of history.

The disruptions everywhere had a common feature: young people, often students, created them. Not only in the United States, Paris, and Prague, but in Tokyo, Mexico City, Madrid, London, and elsewhere students marched in the streets, manned the barricades, and occupied buildings. (Chinese students had an experience all their own. Hundreds of thousands of them, inspired by Mao Zedong, became “Red Guards” and rampaged through the country’s cities and towns, destroying property and persecuting and sometimes murdering their elders, including senior communist officials, in the name of stamping out “bourgeois elements.” The Chinese upheaval came to be known as the Cultural Revolution.)

The theme of 1968, it was often remarked at the time, was a worldwide “youth rebellion.” The year marked the debut in the affairs of their respective countries of the largest age cohort in human history, the so-called Baby Boomers, comprised of people born in the years following World War II. Of all the Western countries the United States had the largest population of Boomers, with 76 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964. In 1968, American Boomers plunged into political activism. Students in the United States—mainly in selective institutions; the large numbers in the workforce mainly stayed on the sidelines—not only protested the war but also disrupted the institutions in which they were studying, notably Columbia University in New York City.

Moreover, American Boomers saw themselves as a distinct, and distinctive, generation. Many of them—certainly the most politically active ones—believed that they were righting historical wrongs and overturning obstacles to social progress and human fulfillment. They were, that is, changing the world. From the perspective of 50 years, is that what the generation of 1968 did?

The world through which they moved certainly has changed, perhaps, in some ways, due to them. They spurned hierarchy, and over the last half-century the United States has become a less hierarchical society. Ethnic and racial minorities and women have greater occupational opportunities now than they did then. The Boomers prided themselves on their informality, and America has become a less formal place. To take one minor but representative example, in 1968 almost every man wore a coat and tie and almost every woman wore a dress for air travel. In 2018 virtually no one does. Whether these changes would have come to pass had 1968 been an entirely uneventful year is, of course, impossible to say.

Individual Boomers have been responsible for some of the most visible and consequential changes of the last half century. These changes have come not from political leaders harnessing the energy of popular fervor and commitment, however, which was the 1968 model. They have arisen, rather, from individual entrepreneurship combining two different and time-honored features of American life: technological innovation and mass consumption. More than any other members of their age cohort, and more than almost all people who have ever lived anywhere at any time in human history, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Jeff Bezos, along with Sergei Brin, Larry Page, and Mark Zuckerberg (the last three not themselves Boomers, having been born in 1973, 1973, and 1984 respectively) have altered the daily lives of virtually every American and hundreds of millions of others around the world. In the context of 1968, moreover, their achievements carry with them an irony: The technology with which the Boomers grew up, of which they made use to spread their message of protest, and that in a sense defined them, was television. The combined efforts of the digital entrepreneurs dethroned television as the world's most important means of communication.

The institution that incubated the defining events of 1968 in the United States, which the activist wing of the Baby Boom generation did eventually come to dominate, is the university; and the fate of the university presents another, final, ironic coda to that year. The student demonstrations of that year were descended from the series of protests, leading to large-scale arrests, that took place in the fall of 1964 at the University of California, Berkeley. A geographic restriction on distributing political literature on the Berkeley campus triggered the protests, which came to be known as the "Free Speech Movement." 50

years later, at Berkeley and at similar institutions across the country, the Boomers who assumed control of them had promulgated, or acquiesced in, speech codes, smothering political orthodoxy, and violent responses to speakers propounding views unpopular with students and faculty, all of which ensured that speech in universities had become, in 2018, distinctly less free than it had been in 1968.

¹ Mark Kurlansky, *1968: The Year that Rocked the World*, New York: Ballantine Books, 2005.

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