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The 1968 Riots: Protesting the Democratic Convention

by Dina Rudenia

(English 1102)

The 1960's were a decade full of turmoil and restlessness. The feminist movement, Vietnam War, the draft, racial riots, and the civil rights movement had sparked much discontent among Americans, leading to some of the most violent behavior since World War II. Against this unstable background, the Democratic Party's National Convention in Chicago in August of 1968 had served as a catalyst in the dangerous rioting of the people. The intended purpose of this event was for fellow Democrats to choose a presidential candidate and decide on what positions the party should hold regarding the most controversial issues of the day (McGowen 1). However, due to the pressing matters of the decade, the people of Chicago had hoped to use the Convention to protest the Vietnam war, the military draft, and a government who seemed to pay no attention to the needs of the people. If not for the Democratic Convention and Mayor Richard Daley's desire for political power, the Chicago riots in August of 1968 could have been either prevented or better controlled by the local government.

Before the Democratic Convention of 1968, Chicago already had a fairly recent history of rioting. The years of 1919 and 1966 had both been a difficult time for Chicago's black districts. These riots were associated with residential and social segregation that had invisibly divided Chicago into various racial districts, and their boundaries were not meant to be crossed. Martin Luther King's arrival in Chicago to help promote the civil rights movement in 1966, followed by his assassination in 1968, had caused a series of intense riots that had left black Chicago homes burned and raided, while their owners were being harassed and killed (Bailey). These troublesome events had put other cities ahead of Chicago on President Johnson's list of favorable Convention-hosting cities, and Mayor Richard Daley saw this as a negative reflection on his political status (Farber 115).

In order to host the Democratic Convention and convey its symbolism of power to Chicago, Daley traveled to Washington D.C. on October 8th of 1967 to try to gain President Johnson's approval. Hosting the convention would mean portraying an elevated political status and making millions of dollars from the jobs it would bring to the city. In Washington, Daley attempted to convince Johnson that if the Convention was not hosted in Chicago, he might potentially lose Illinois in the upcoming presidential election. At the time, Houston was favored above Chicago as a convention city, but Daley claimed that hosting it there would be useless since Texas was already supporting Johnson in the election (Farber 116). These reasons were apparently logical to the president, because Chicago was chosen to host the Convention, and Richard Daley was looking forward to showing off "Chicago as the number one convention city" (Farber 116). The event was to be held in August of 1968. However, no one could predict the drastic chain of events it would coax out of the people of Chicago.

The Convention riots started out as protests against the many controversial issues that would be decided upon during the Democratic Convention. The major problem was the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War. Since the early 1960s, government officials had been promising Americans that even though U.S. involvement in Vietnam was necessary, it would be very limited and brief. By the end of 1967, over 500,000 troops had been sent to Vietnam. (McGowen 8). It was becoming evident that U.S. troops would be continuously sent overseas to fight the battle of another country.

Another major problem related to Vietnam occurred in January of 1968, which marked the beginning of the first day of Tet on the Vietnamese calendar. The North Vietnamese Army and the Vietcong surrounded Khe Sanh in South Vietnam, and while all the attention was focused there, the Northern Vietnamese Army and Vietcong attacked major cities in South Vietnam, including U.S. air and military bases (McGowen 14). While this was happening, Americans were being assured by their government that the U.S. was “close to achieving its goals” in Vietnam (McGowen 14). Soon, it became clear that the war was not going as planned, and the military involvement was not going to be as limited and brief as expected. American citizens began to understand that their own government was not being 100% truthful with them. With so much unrest within the country, it seemed like United States was warring both at home and overseas (McGowen 15).

Due to its vast involvement in the war, United States was experiencing a growing need for troops. In order to fulfill this need, the selective service, or draft, escalated. When a young man turned 18, he was required to register with the government, and if selected, had to serve at least 2 years in the military (McGowen 14). Along with protesting America’s involvement in another country’s affairs, the riots of 1968 were also opposing the mandatory draft that would force Americans to participate in a war they did not support. At this point, the civil rights movement that had been supported by Martin Luther King had evolved from ending racial segregation to ending America’s involvement in Vietnam’s problems (McGowen 20).

Due to these issues, the Democratic Convention appeared to be taking place in two different places. Inside the convention center, politicians would meet, make speeches, cast votes, and be interviewed by the media to relay the events to the public. However, outside of the convention, the protesters gathered to oppose the decisions the delegates would make inside the convention: delegates that did not seem to truly represent the needs of the people (McGowen 4).

Despite the rioting going on outside, Richard Daley attempted to portray himself as maintaining full control of the city. Armed with 12,000 police officers, Daley assured the convention delegates that everything would go smoothly (Simon). However, that was not the case. The riots escalated, and the rioters were seriously hurt. Ira Jaffe and Vivian Stovall were two protesters who formed a human chain in Grant Park when the police showed up to chase them away. “The police would move in with clubs and tear gas. We were being kicked, pulled apart, and some very racial statements being made” (Simon). That does not represent a city under control. But in a larger context, it also does not represent a country with a government that makes the decisions it does in the best interest of the people.

In his book titled “*No One Was Killed*”, John Schultz stated that Mayor Daley and the police force attempted to block the protest “not only because it represented a mythic nightmare for those who control large material intentions and directions of this country, but because they know the protest-revolt to be a real and future threat to them” (Shultz 3). The protesters may have been handled differently, but eventually they had to be treated as a growing threat to those who hold any political power. It is unfortunate that circumstances had to be so violent for the people to be further encouraged to voice their oppositions to the government’s decisions, but then again, when does anyone in power respond well to being opposed? Being attacked with tear gas, mace, clubs appeared like a dust storm from the convention center where the delegates were holding their meetings (Frank). The convention that Daley had desired to host in order to boost his political status had turned into a reason for the people in Chicago to speak out against the government in the hopes that they would be heard.

When Daley decided that the voices of protest and discontent had grown much too loud, he decided to prove to the delegates that he was still the king of his city. After Martin Luther’s assassination, Daley had criticized the city’s police commissioner for being too gentle with the rioters, and claimed that the police should have been ordered to “shoot to kill” the protesters (McGowen 35). The only way Daley wanted to deal with the rioters was to put them in their place

and to show them who's in control, as opposed to hearing them out and coming to some sort of a compromise with his own people. Armed with over 6,000 National Guardsmen and even more army troops, machine guns and rocket launchers were a regular sight to see in the streets of Chicago during the Convention (McGowen 36).

Protesters attempted to work with the city to keep their demonstrations within legal limits. They applied for permits to sleep in the city's parks, but the city denied them and gave the police reason to use clubs, mace, and tear gas at 11 p.m. to force the protesters out of the parks after curfew (McGowen 37). Being denied by their city and local government, protesters were encouraged to keep on with their demonstrations, opposing the Vietnam War, the draft, the Democratic Convention, and the government in general.

Despite the circumstances, Daley wanted to keep up appearances. It was more important to him to keep Michigan Avenue free of demonstrators than it was to allow the people in Chicago to have freedom of speech and assembly. He valued the state of his neighborhoods and parks far more than he valued "abstract ideas" about national stability and calm (Farber 256). His political outlook only extended as far as his own city, Chicago. He did not seem to grasp that Chicago was part of a bigger picture, and that the political status of the country would directly impact it. His beloved city was not segregated from the rest of the country, and did not reside in its own bubble of safety that would prevent the decisions of the government from causing turmoil in the streets of Chicago. The Democratic Convention would not ease the tension, neither would it elevate Daley's political career while he attempted to host a Convention with his own people rioting outside in the streets.

So if the Democratic National Convention did not add to Chicago's political resume due to the extreme dissent among the people, what did it accomplish? It helped to emphasize the viewpoints that had served as the foundation in shaping United States. Without freedom of speech and the right to assemble, all decisions would be made by the government with little or no regard to what the people want to see their leaders do. Of course, the Democratic Convention did not need to be hosted in Chicago in order for riots against the war, draft, and government to break out. The demonstrators simply saw the convention as an opportunity to be heard, since their government had not been listening to them very well until this point. Having so much media coverage at once because of the convention allowed the protesters to exclaim "The whole world is watching!" (McGowen 17). Beginning to see the protesters as a threat to his image of being in control, Richard Daley allowed his police force to use violence against the protesters. His lust for political power prevented him from genuinely caring about the welfare of his citizens, as opposed to simply being able to keep those citizens in line. Without the convention, Daley would have had more time and energy to focus on Chicago and making his people feel represented instead of planning for an event that would selfishly serve him well and put more money in his pocket.

Today, riots are still possible, and the extent to which they may escalate is uncertain. There are many of the same and new issues that could be so controversial as to cause an uprising. Wars, government involvement in foreign countries, our national debt, abortion, gay marriage, legalizing certain substances, and other things are capable of causing major discontent. These potential riots would not be limited to Chicago because the issues mentioned have spread throughout United States and continue to be a struggle in every state. The government cannot please both sides of the same issue, but must make compromises to make both sides feel like they have been heard. No one wants to be ruled by a government that ignores the opinions of the people it governs. Looking back on the Democratic Convention of 1968 and Richard Daley's reaction to the protests, political leaders today can better understand what the general public is capable of when they are not heard. If the convention had not been hosted in Chicago, the riots would have probably taken place in another convention city, or they might not have happened at all. Mayor Daley's politically lustful leadership had helped to ignite the flames of anger in Chicagoans when the convention was chosen to be hosted there. History may repeat itself unless humankind can learn from its past mistakes and take precautions in

their future decisions to prevent disasters as opposed to trying to solve them once they have already gained momentum.

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