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Chicago Post Mortem 2024: How This Time Can be Different

I was proud to be an antiwar activist in Chicago at the time of the Democratic convention in 1968. I helped organize events there and then the next year worked on the staff of the Chicago Conspiracy trial that followed.

We were very much about movement building. Including trying as best we could to minimize the division between “political” and “cultural” activists. That meant movement centers, concerts and more, not just protests.

Back then I didn’t appreciate how extraordinary it was that a U.S. war engendered such widespread internal opposition. It was decades before I became fully aware of the violence required for territorial expansion, conquest and control that created the continuous history of the USA.

It takes work to overcome the obfuscation of the magnitude of violence required by settler colonialism to expand from sea to shining sea and beyond. Then add in racialized slavery and segregation. Together with patriarchy, gun worship, and other factors, we live in an immersive, self-renewing Culture of Violence the likes of which has never existed anywhere before.

Support for war and aggression has always been bipartisan. The names of the political parties have changed and evolved since the U.S. became a modern nation state. But there has never been a mainstream peace party. Nor is there one now.

Currently, the President sending the limitless money and weapons happens to be a Democrat. Lest anyone forget the Republican’s loyalty to the cause, however, the “sane” presidential aspirant, Nikki Haley thought it was a great idea to be photographed

autographing the U.S. manufactured and supplied bombs before they were loaded on the U.S. made warplanes.

Once and only once

Zooming out to see the long arc of USA! USA! USA! — only that one time did *any* war engender the kind of mass opposition that showed up in Chicago in 1968 as part of the circa 1965-1975 antiwar movement.

It's not that opposition to other wars was zero. There were, for example, conscientious objectors during WWI and WWII. The Civil War never had majority support in the North. It spawned the only other active draft resistance movement in U.S. history.

Which is how it works. People don't want to fight in wars they oppose. I address this because I have learned over the decades that many people are mistakenly persuaded that it was the 1960's draft that *caused* the antiwar movement. If that were true, there would have been comparable opposition to the Korean war. But there wasn't.

For many reasons, especially the impact of the freedom movement in the South, there was unprecedented *mass* opposition to the war on Viet Nam, Cambodia and Laos.

Today's antigenocide movement is also unique.

In modern history there has never been a time when a genocide was significantly opposed *while it was underway* by people other than those being attacked. Certainly not during the Holocaust. Meaning no disrespect to those who gave refuge to those fleeing Hitler's regime, Germany mostly attracted opposition for its expansionist territorial ambitions, not for sending millions of Jewish people and others into gas ovens.

It's true that the efforts of the South African government in the International Court of Justice, U.N. votes, the Uncommitted movement and huge global protests have yet to save a single Palestinian life, school, hospital, business or residence. But that doesn't change the extraordinary nature of the struggle to do so.

What time is it on the clock of U.S. militarism?

Is the military-industrial complex stronger today than it was in 1968? Or weaker?

Stronger, by a lot. Better funded, more entrenched in every nook and cranny of the economy, certainly more powerful in Congress. Vastly improved at preventing discussion in the public sphere about militarism or peace.

Specific to the political conventions, my guess is that if asked, more delegates in 1968 would have expressed genuine sympathy for the children of Vietnam than would 2024 delegates on behalf of Palestinian children. I don't remember any delegates in 1968 wearing camo hats.

In 2024, no Palestinians were permitted to speak. The calculation apparently is that Kamala enthusiasm, especially among Black voters, will more than offset any votes lost to Palestinians or their sympathizers.

In her acceptance speech, Kamala Harris said:

And America, we must also be steadfast in advancing our security and values abroad. ...As commander in chief, I will ensure America always has the strongest, most lethal fighting force in the world. And I will fulfill our sacred obligation to care for our troops and their families, and I will always honor and never disparage their service and their sacrifice.

Interestingly 1968 nominee Hubert Humphrey, who also inherited the nomination from a President who chose not to run, expressed a weak hope for a ceasefire in Vietnam. So did Kamla Harris about Palestine. She even paid lip service to Palestinian suffering—without, of course acknowledging who was financing and supplying the weapons that cause the atrocities in the first place.

What's telling however is this from Humphrey:

But the task of slowing down the arms race, of halting the nuclear escalation—there is no more urgent task than ending this threat to the very survival of our planet, and if I am elected as your President, I commit myself body, mind and soul to this task.

Harris espoused nothing anywhere close to that. For all the allusions to struggles for civil rights, there were virtually no references to non-violence or Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. or any danger whatsoever of nuclear war. The plan was clearly to reassure voters that President Harris would be a loyal and competent Colonizer in Chief.

Things take time to work out. At the moment however, the energy and resources for Palestinian solidarity devoted to the Democratic convention appeared to have failed. Maybe even backfired. [Here's how long time Middle East advocate and expert Helena Cobban assessed it:](#)

This week the U.S. Democratic Party put on two big performances that left me even more depressed than last week. In Chicago, the party's big-bucks powers-that-be put on an intricately choreographed, North Korea-style pageant of "joy" and "unity" in which they very pointedly threw the party's anti-genocide activists under a bus. And during plane rides around West Asia, meanwhile, Secretary of State Blinken continued his lengthy "performance" of trying to win a Gaza ceasefire deal, *while American weapons continued to flow copiously to the most heavily armed and genocidal actor in the region.*

For Blinken and his bosses—Pres. Biden, and now also VP Harris—that “performance” of diplomacy is precisely the point. “We are working ceaselessly...” “We are working around the clock...” Etc., etc. Their effort in this is either woefully uninformed or wittingly mendacious, or both.

The 1968 antiwar movement was decidedly not anticolonialist. Most participants were and still are fiercely loyal to the machinery that has produced all the wars before and since. The same is generally true now regarding the genocide being carried out against Palestinians.

An often-overlooked manifestation of that fidelity, even stronger now than then, is allegiance to the importance of the Presidency. Worship of the U.S. presidency is itself an expression of support for Empire. All our lives we have been told that the president of the USA is the most powerful person in the world.

We are supposed to take pride in that. The wall-to-wall media coverage of the intricately planned spectacle of both parties’ conventions is itself more flaunting of opulence, gigantism and aspirations to red-white-and blue world domination.

Consequently, even a demonstration at a Convention cannot help but be a degree of compliance with the structure of Empire itself. Inescapably therefore further legitimizing the very thing that some of us at least want to be the change *from*. That’s not meant to suggest that there should never be protests at such events. Only that there is a tradeoff worth considering.

The Military Industrial complex is stronger. White Empire is weaker.

The more wars the Pentagon loses—which is all of them, albeit at the cost of millions of lives and other damage—the more money it gets. The more they fail to meet their recruitment goals, the more they up the incentives for enlistment. And hire mercenaries. And invest in automated warfare.

Virtually every success the Ukrainian military achieves is because they ignore what their Pentagon advisors tell them to do. The U.S. Navy is routinely outmaneuvered by teenage Houthi rebels. People go to Beijing or Istanbul to negotiate global military and political deals. Not to Washington or Camp David.

The post WWII era of U.S. global hegemony is in irreversible decline. For peace advocates, appreciating this profound shift is important to our analysis and strategy.

So, to pose a different question, will the movement supporting Palestine in 2024 come to more deeply challenge the underlying racism, militarism and materialism that Rev. Martin Luther King said in 1967 made the U.S. “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world?”

Theories of change

If a theory of change keeps reinforcing the status quo over decades or even hundreds of years, perhaps it isn't really a theory of change after all. Or at least not an effective one. Maybe over time, like a bad marriage it becomes a learned and convenient codependence. Personally, I don't want the opposite of what we have now. I want something way better than that. As to how we get there, hindsight confirms even more strongly a predominantly non-electoral theory of change.

Elections for school board, municipal offices and ballot initiatives can be significant exceptions. And there is much to be said for the argument of Aurora Levins Morales and others that electoral participation, especially at the Presidential level, is best understood through the lens of [choosing your opponent](#).

But it's the Montgomery Bus Boycotts; the Mississippi Summers; the people's diplomacy efforts; the building of Beloved Communities including Palestinian solidarity encampments; resistance to military service and other strategies in a virtuous cycle that can create more *transformative* change.

The antiwar movement itself was a marvel of energy, creativity and innovation. Including interactions with the Vietnamese. Many activists engaged with Madame Nguyen T. Binh and other Vietnamese leaders to better understand the Vietnamese reality. This strategy built on lessons the Vietnamese had learned from their successful struggle against the French.

At the time there was also a global anticolonial movement that influenced the context in which the war was understood and opposed. Many, though by no means all, U.S. peace and justice activists have been in solidarity with the Palestinian movement for many years. There is a particular bond with the Black community. The engagement of Jewish Voice for Peace since October 7, 2023 has been remarkable. While different in *form*, internationally there is at least as much support for Palestine now as there was for Viet Nam in the 1960's.

What's new, what now?

While it's as amorphous as all get out, there is a growing component of the movement that is quite different from what existed in 1968. Maybe it could be called emergent strategies, a term used by [adrienne maree brown](#). Seeking to grow beyond the narrow limitations of much past and current thinking, many are exploring approaches that combine cultural, economic and spiritual theory and practice into a different kind of movement building.

Not a day goes by that I don't learn about a new book, article or video expressing this emerging perspective. **BECOMING KIN** by Patty Krawec and **WHAT IT TAKES TO HEAL** by Prentis Hemphill are examples that center the *revolution in values* that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called for.

As part of the [National Council of Elders](#), King and Breaking Silence Project, I have been involved with organizing a series of webinars including. [Decolonize](#); and [From Terror to Transformation Can The Violence In Palestine-Israel Become A Turning Point For Humanity?](#) The most recent [Only Revolutionary Love Can Save Us Now](#) features a conversation between Michelle Alexander and Rev. Nelson and Joyce Johnson of the Beloved Community Center in Greensboro, North Carolina.

These programs combine new insights with lessons learned over the last fifty plus years. They explore “making the path by walking” to a broader and deeper way toward lasting change.

Should we do everything we can to stop the current slaughter of Palestinians? Of course. Which can be entirely compatible with trying to replace the culture of violence system already working on the next wars and genocides.

To the degree we succeed, millions of lives will be saved. And, as the John Lennon song [Imagine](#) envisions, in another 56 years we won't still need to be protesting whatever slaughter the U.S. is involved in then.

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