



Back to the Future

LEARNING LESSONS FOR THE 90s FROM THE VOICES OF THE 60s.

By Dr. Peter Dreier

When students today talk about the Sixties, their views reflect cynicism and nostalgia—both wildly inaccurate—that distort the experience and meaning of that era. If these misperceptions were just a matter of historical curiosity, it wouldn't be very important. But our images of the 1960s have a direct influence on our attitudes and actions in the 1990s.

The cynical student says something like this: "Look at all the energy those activists spent—and what did it get them? Nothing really changes." The message is that idealism and activism don't pay off, so why bother?

Nostalgic students give another version of that period: "I wish I were 25 years older so I could have been there in the Sixties." The notion is that, by an accident of birth, they just missed the most exciting years this century had to offer—the best of times, never to be repeated.

These stereotypes are compounded by contemporary politicians and journalists who blame such problems as decaying inner cities, drug abuse and poverty on the Sixties. The reality is that these issues are part of the unfinished reform agenda that has been slowed down by the privileged, those who want to roll back the clock and reverse the progress of the past three decades. They reinforce the view that if only we could return to some earlier, simpler era—America before 1960—the USA would be a better place.

If we are to have a clear understanding of where our society might go in the years ahead, and how we might contribute to social progress, we have to rid ourselves of these historical cobwebs.

America in 1960

To begin to address the view that activists in the Sixties accomplished very little, consider what the United States was like 35 years ago.

African Americans (still called "colored" people) were systematically denied the vote in the South and lived under a day-to-day reign of terror where vigilante justice prevailed. Most public facilities—including schools—were legally segregated. There were no significant African-American elected officials in the South and almost none in the North.

If you were poor, anywhere in America, you starved or froze,

and your children could eat lead-based paint from the peeling walls in slums. There were no laws requiring landlords to keep their apartments in decent condition and no food stamps or fuel-assistance programs. There was no Medicare or Medicaid. Poor people who couldn't afford a lawyer were out of luck; there were no Legal Services programs.

American women, including those in college, were still under the sexist mindset of the "feminine mystique." Most women majored in education, nursing or social work and few expected to have lifetime careers. There were no women's studies courses, no rape crisis centers, no battered women's shelters. No birth control. No legalized abortion. No laws against sex discrimination.

There was no Freedom of Information Act to allow the press and the public to scrutinize the actions of their government and few Americans questioned the authority of federal leaders. As late as 1964, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which gave President Johnson the go-ahead to deepen the country's involvement in Vietnam. Only many years—and many deaths—later did people realize that Johnson was lying. It also took years before most people realized the folly of Vietnam and the two-facedness of many of our political leaders. By the time most Americans knew what was happening, we were, as Pete Seeger sings, "waist deep in the Big Muddy."

Indeed, few Americans understood international affairs. Africa was viewed as the "dark continent," not a colonized region in the Third World struggling for self-determination.

During the 1950s, the U.S. invaded or helped to overthrow Third World governments in Iran and Guatemala—and almost no one knew ... or cared.

In 1960, there were few laws designed to protect the air, water or workplaces from dangerous pollutants. The Environmental Protection Agency didn't exist. Natural resources were wasted without much thought about how consumption might affect future generations or foreign policy.

The government, academic scientists and industry had Americans believing in "atoms for peace." Nuclear weapons and nuclear power were considered safe and necessary.

Television and the movies portrayed a *Leave it to Beaver* life.

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Activism Pays Off

Despite the cynical view that activism in the 1960s didn't pay off, it is obvious that, for all of our society's current problems, the movements of the era accomplished a great deal.

While there are still problems, the general public and college students today are more aware of national and international affairs. Our elected leaders are much more accountable to public opinion and political protest. Our major corporations are now held to higher standards regarding consumer and environmental safety, truth in advertising, hiring discrimination and other matters. Organized citizens play a more vibrant role in our society.

The key movements of the Sixties—for civil rights, peace, consumer safety and environmental protection, women's rights and farm workers—were major steps forward in our history. But the lasting gains were not inevitable. They were not gifts from altruistic government leaders. They were wrested after long struggles by committed activists. They were the products of mass movements.

Who were those activists? Most of us think of such people as Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez, Ralph Nader or Marian Wright Edelman (this year's commencement speaker and head of the Children's Defense Fund).

But the heroes of these movements were, for the most part, ordinary people: the college students who worked in the South to aid voter registration, the women who started the first "consciousness-raising" groups, the peace activists who organized the big anti-war rallies, or who refused the draft.

Some activists dedicated their lives to social change. But millions of Americans made history by playing small parts in a larger drama. They participated in boycotts, wrote letters, demonstrated, gave money or voted for progressive candidates.

Unfortunately, we often have short memories about the gains made in the past three decades. We recall the slogans, the public events and the violence. We forget that peoples' lives were dramatically changed—that these movements forced our society to live up to its promises and practice what it preaches. Because of the Sixties, the U.S. came a little closer to the standards of democracy we teach in civics classes.

Dissent is Normal

So the cynical view of the Sixties simply isn't accurate. But neither is the nostalgic view that the era was exciting but atypical. We've returned to "normalcy" now, according to this view, and we're caught up in the indifferent '90s. The future may be uncertain, but it certainly won't be as exciting.

The Sixties were certainly years of protest and change. But such periods are normal in American history. From the Boston Tea Party, to the Abolitionists, to the suffragists, to the Progressive-era reformers, the Depression-era unionists and the 1950s "ban-the-bomb" movement, protest has been a consistent

[Continued on page 47]

Blacks, Latinos and Asians still played stereotypical roles, like Amos 'n' Andy, Pancho on *The Cisco Kid* and Hop Sing on *Bonanza*. They did not play leading roles on prime time TV. Neither did women, except for the *I Love Lucy* "dim wit" variety.

The nightly news shows were 15 minutes long. Folk singer Pete Seeger and other activists were blacklisted from network TV and Hollywood because of their political beliefs. There were no films like *Missing*, *China Syndrome*, *Atomic Cafe*, *Philadelphia*, *El Norte*, *Do the Right Thing*, *The Killing Fields*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Wall Street* or *Norma Rae* that questioned the practices of government and business.

In 1960, college campuses nationwide were bastions of conformity. Universities viewed themselves as surrogate parents. Students obeyed strict curfews and dress codes and took few elective courses. On many campuses, students were required to join ROTC and, if you weren't in a sorority or fraternity, you were a "misfit." Faculty members conducted war-related classified research without being scrutinized or criticized by their peers or pupils. The National Student Association was funded in part by the CIA. Colleges had not yet recovered from McCarthyism. College administrators allowed few, if any, controversial speakers on their campuses and watched carefully over student newspapers and organizations.

There were few (if any) professors and few (if any) courses that challenged the basic assumptions of American foreign policy or dealt with the problems of the environment. There were few courses on poverty or racism. There were few courses on African-American, Asian American or Latino history or culture.

Back to the Future . . .

[Continued from page 13]
thread in our history.

Progress has been the result of these dissenters and their movements for change. For a few short years—from the beginning of World War II through the McCarthyism of the 1950s—this thread was partially broken. Thus, for the journalists or academics or students who were products of the postwar conformity and fear, the Sixties must have seemed like an aberration. Certainly, the media painted it that way. And still does.

We can't learn from the past if we don't know about it. I am no longer shocked that many students arrive at Oxy never having heard of the heroes and the dissenters who have helped change America: Eugene Debs, W.E.B. DuBois, Ida Wells, Jane Addams, Dorothy Day, Alice Paul, Upton Sinclair, Margaret Sanger, Woody Guthrie, Ella Baker, Rachel Carson, Saul Alinsky, Jackie Robinson, Dolores Huerta or even Rosa Parks.

Many of the most important movements, events and individuals in our history have been almost erased from our collective memory—and some of this “social amnesia” is quite intentional. The accomplishments of Paul Robeson, one of the most brilliant scholars, performers and activists our country has ever produced, were consciously removed from our history books because of his outspoken criticism of the nation's injustices during the McCarthy period. In Lawrence, Mass., a few years ago, an art exhibit portraying the 1912 “bread and roses” textile strike was banned from the public library. Many residents whose parents or grandparents participated in that landmark event had never even heard of the strike.

So it is not surprising that many Americans, including Oxy students, view the Sixties as an eccentric “blip” of history.

Indeed, they also view the '70s, '80s and '90s as decades of apathy and indifference, a reaction to the noisy '60s. But in fact, in the last three decades, movements emerged that have had a dramatic impact on our society, including the women's movement, the consumer movement and the environmental movement, which got started with the Earth Day in 1970.

The past three decades also have witnessed protest movements against nuclear arms, nuclear power, toxins in workplaces and cities, government indifference to the AIDS epidemic, the deficiencies of our health care system and apartheid in South Africa.

During this period, groups concerned about injustices at the workplace—9 to 5, the Justice for Janitors campaign, the United Farm Workers Union—have improved conditions for many low-wage workers. At the same time, many neighborhood, tenant and community groups emerged nationwide. A local example is the Esperanza Community Housing Corporation in Los Angeles, where Alice Salinas (a 1990 Oxy grad in public policy) works as a neighborhood planner and project manager.

The Sixties were not the “best of times.” Rather, they were a link in a long chain of social reform and change. So why do so many people, including Occidental students, accept the nostalgic version of that decade?

One reason is that the media tends to focus its attention on activists of the 1960s who have joined the so-called “establishment.” It fits neatly into the notion that the era was, a momentary bubble that has now burst—and that activists grow up and lose their idealism.

It's a great cliché. But it's a lie. Unfortunately, though, it's repeated so often, in many different ways, it has gained an aura of truth. In reality, studies show, most 1960s activists have remained politically active, held on to their idealism and used their skills to bring about

social change. The list of '60s activists who “kept the faith” is a long one. If they were given more media attention, our view of reality—of activism and idealism—might be very different.

So would our views about the future. If we recognize how much grassroots activism is currently going on in our society—and how much potential there is to do even more—we would be neither cynical nor nostalgic. We'd have a more realistic—indeed, optimistic—vision of what is possible. And how we might want to spend our lives and use our skills.

Looking Ahead

As we approach the 21st century, America is facing many difficult problems.

Compared with 1960, we live in a much more global economy, one in which the U.S. no longer dominates in terms of trade or prosperity. As a result, the disparity of income and wealth in the U.S. has widened. Today, according to a recent report by the 20th Century Fund, it is the widest among all industrial nations. The nation's poverty rate, which steadily declined during the 1960s and 1970s, has been growing for more than a decade. Today, one out of seven Americans—and one out of four young children—lives below the poverty line.

In 1960, incomes for most American families were growing. In the past 15 years, the standard of living for the majority of Americans, including the troubled middle class, has declined. And economic hard times exacerbate racism and sexism. When people are hurting economically, issues like protecting the environment or providing federal support for the arts sound like luxuries.

Whether America can muster the political will to address these problems is an open question. But those who say that this generation of American youth is apathetic or self-absorbed should learn some lessons from our recent past. Who in 1960 could have envisioned all the changes that would take place?

What will the rest of this century and the beginning of the next one be like? Recently, Jim Scheibel, the director of the federal government's AmeriCorps-VISTA volunteer service agency, spoke on campus. He was tremendously impressed with our students' commitment to voluntarism and activism. About half of all Oxy students are involved in some kind of community service. Some work with the homeless or with people with AIDS. Some work with community groups trying to improve their neighborhoods by constructing affordable housing, fighting crime or demanding better schools. Some Oxy students tutor schoolchildren. Others volunteer with organizations working to improve the environment, address the problems of domestic violence and rape, or fight attempts to roll back our progress on race relations. Some Oxy students have even gotten full-time jobs upon graduation with these groups. They now have “careers with a conscience.”

Our nation's future depends on what the members of this generation decide to do with their lives. When we reach the year 2000, or 2025, and look back on the 1990s, will we all be proud of the choices we made? Will we have helped make American society more democratic, more egalitarian, more humane, more environmentally safe?

Many Oxy students are taking these questions seriously. As much as what they learn and discuss in the classroom, that is an important part of their educational experience at Occidental. **■**

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