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In 1967, many of today's college seniors were in their last year at another school—grade school. But it was the dawn of a movement. Where are those who helped start that movement today?

An Elegy for the New Left

By Lance Morrow
Time Magazine Staff Writer

Nothing can last in America more than ten years.

—Philip Rahv

In 1967, the New Left was just starting to harvest its biggest crops of the newly radicalized. Draft cards and American flags went up in smoke. The Spring Mobilization to End the War in Viet Nam brought together hundreds of thousands of protesters in San Francisco and New York. Dow Chemical's recruiters were driven off campus. Ahead for the movement lay Woodstock, Chicago, Kent State, the Days of Rage...

Now, ten years later, the children's revolution of the '60s comes straggling back, startling to recognize in the summer of 1977. As if they had been flash-frozen in 1970, demonstrators at Kent State have been trying to prevent construction of a gym near the spot where four students died. Sometimes the '60s reappear as a waxworks item of nostalgia: four young men each night take the stage of Manhattan's Winter Garden to impersonate the Beatles of long ago. Or else a splendid fable of arrogance brought low: those who warned "Never trust anyone over 30" are now losing their hair. The wife of Troubadour Bob Dylan ("something is happening here but you don't know what it is do you Mister Jones?") divorced him because she said that, among other things, he was a wife beater. Ex-Yippie Jerry Rubin, 39 now, lives in a sleek Manhattan high-rise, complete with uniformed doorman. "We are not into sacrifice, martyrdom," he has written. Rubin and his roommate, Mimi Leonard, plan to get married in December. The most startling news is about Rennie Davis, who helped organize the Chicago Seven's convention mischief in 1968 and later blissed out on the Perfect Master Maharaj Ji. Davis, it turns out, now sells life insurance for John Hancock in Denver, wearing contact lenses and what looks like a blow-dry hairdo. He is living, he says, a sweet, useful life: *Brighten the Corner Where You Are*.

It all proves once again that passions and issues are ephemeral and that, as the late Philip Rahv, an editor and longtime student of the American left, knew, radical movements in the U.S. are cyclical. Once, the generation of the New Left and counterculture believed that its youth, like the war in Viet Nam, would go on forever. It is tempting today to throw cherry bombs into the ruins of that delusion: the period seems prime for revisionism and ridicule. But to see that generation contemptuously as merely the screaming, Spock-coddled army of Consciousness III ignores the great changes it helped to cause in American life. Says Tom Hayden, one of the founders of the Students for a Democratic Society, who last year ran against John Tunney in the California senatorial race: "We ended a war, toppled two Presidents, desegregated the South, broke other barriers of discrimination." That is hyperbolic, such changes did not occur until a broader nonradical public became disillusioned. But the energies of the young during the '60s made Americans begin to think about their environment, about the poor, about the purposes of progress. One of the most enduring products of the decade could be women's liberation. Because of the '60s, the '70s are quite different from the '50s—despite some similarities of quiet and self-absorption.

The problem—and the charm—was that nobody in the '60s planned anything. And so Hayden is left to wonder ruefully: "How could we accomplish so much and have so little at the end?" Part of the answer lies in an epigram of the social theorist Ernest Becker: "A protest without a program is little more than sentimentalism—this is the epitaph of many of the great idealisms." The first generation raised by the pale blue light of the tube grew up on the sweet simplicities of *Leave It to Beaver*; it had an outrageous inclination to think that all of life's injustices could be straightened out in time for the station break.

The young of the '60s were raised to believe that America was a splendidly virtuous country. When they found—through the Bay of Pigs, Selma, the assassinations, Viet Nam—that it was something more ambiguous, they rose up in horror that now seems touching in its spontaneity. They joined in immense numbers—the baby boom's demographic bulge—and without philosophy or program. That was the strength and ultimate weakness of the movement: it arose out of moral outrage and indignation, and grew larger precisely because it ran out of moral energy, it collapsed like a small dying star.

Repression did its part, of course; the Black Panthers had much of their leadership wiped out by the police. But there were other reasons. The war ended. Time passed. Metabolisms changed. Manson and Altamont—a California rock festival where a young man was knifed to death—took the innocence out of being a freak. In a post-mortem on the "tired radicals" of the First World War era, author Walter Weyl wrote, "Adolescence is the true day of revolt, the day when obscure forces, as mysterious as growth, push us, trembling out of our narrow lives, into the wide throbbing life beyond self."

The New Left operated in a cavalier—and ultimately fatal—ignorance of the past. It should have known, should have remembered, that the American left has always been its own worst enemy, that, as Historian Christopher Lasch wrote, "the history of American radicalism... is largely a history of failure. Radicalism in the United States has no great triumphs to record."



The kids who made up the New Left and counterculture are men and women now. They did not merely step onto the centrifuge of the '60s and pinwheel themselves out in the direction of Aquarius, to vanish forever. Many simply settled down. Says David Dellinger, 60, an elder statesman of the movement: "A lot of people had been leading emergency lives for a long time. They had put off schooling, babies, their own lives."

As always, the U.S. has demonstrated an infuriating (to radicals) talent for absorbing and accommodating even those who began by wanting to tear the whole place down. Smoking marijuana is practically legal; the draft has been abolished. But the radical impulse is still there. A few weeks ago in Denver, the Third Annual Conference on Alternative State and Local Public Policies attracted

some 400 electoral strategists, leftist policy intellectuals, would-be officeholders and labor organizers. The old New Left now expresses itself in a number of local forms. A man named David Olsen founded the San Francisco-based New School for Democratic Management, where workers are taught how to run their own businesses. People from the movement have revived interest in such unglamorous electoral jobs as county assessor, state treasurer and tax commissioner. Sam Brown, an antiwar leader who became state treasurer of Colorado, is now the director of ACTION, the federal agency encompassing VISTA and the Peace Corps.

A number of American corporations are feeling the presence of executives in their thirties who, having been schooled in '60s virtues, want more openness and disclosure in business, more debate before making decisions, more flexibility in personal and professional styles. Says Stephen McLin, 30, a vice president for the Bank of America (an outfit some incendiary radicals kept trying to burn down about seven years ago). "The impact of this generation will be felt. But the time isn't now. It's coming in about four or five years."

It may be a delusion to think that the country is finished with what used to be called Woodstock Nation. Pierre Joseph Proudhon warned about "the fecundity of the unexpected." The present comparative quiet probably will not last. Issues such as nuclear energy, the arms race (the neutron bomb), the environment, the economy, unemployment and the urban underclass all lie in wait for anyone who approaches the future complacently. It would of course be difficult for history to duplicate the long, wild hallucination of the '60s. But Rahv's ten-year rule applies to historical pauses as well as upheavals. The cycle will surely come around again.

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