THE SIXTIES
YEARS OF HOPE
DAYS OF RAGE

TODD GITLIN

COPY 1
ONE

AFFLUENCE
AND
UNDERTOW

The radical of the thirties came out of a system that had stopped and the important job was to organize new production relations which would start it up again. The sixties radical opened his eyes to a system pouring its junk over everybody, or nearly everybody, and the problem was to stop just that, to escape being overwhelmed by a mindless, goalless flood which marooned each individual on his little island of commodities.

—Arthur Miller

LEFTWARD
KICKING AND
SCREAMING

1960

History rarely follows the decimal system as neatly as it did in 1960. Suddenly the campus mood seemed to shift. Without question a major reason was that the end of the Eisenhower era was looming; whatever doubts attached to John F. Kennedy, one could anticipate a thaw, a sense of the possible. What had been underground flowed to the surface. After all the prologues and precursors, an insurgency materialized, and the climate of opinion began to shift, the way spring announces itself with scents and a scatter of birdsong before the temperature climbs to stay. And then it was as if, all over the country, young people had been waiting for just these signals.

In Greensboro, North Carolina, on February 1, four black (then known as Negro) students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College, wearing jackets and ties, sat down at a Woolworth's whites-only lunch counter, claimed their right to be served, and refused to leave. Contrary to movement legend, these four—Ezell Blair, Jr., Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, and David Richmond—did not spring full-blown from the abstract idea of resistance to segregation. They had belonged to the Youth Council of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and knew of earlier sit-ins in Durham, North Carolina, and elsewhere. (Indeed, without benefit of mass publicity or a mass base, but with the help of black churches, the NAACP, and the Congress of Racial Equality, there had been sit-ins in at least sixteen cities since 1957.) They had been nourished in a tradition of
liberation passed on to them by parents, ministers, and teachers; by an active NAACP; by the Montgomery bus boycott, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and its leader Martin Luther King; by participants in earlier Freedom Rides; by the writings of black heroes; by a television documentary about Gandhi. The four returned on February 2 with twenty-five other young people, some wearing ROTC uniforms. Twice as many went back to Woolworth's the day after that; by the fifth day, there were more than three hundred. Their audacious refusal to “know their place” touched off a wave of sit-ins at lunch counters across the urban South. The word spread through church networks and civil rights movement clusters, and within days sit-ins were organized in other cities in North Carolina; within two weeks, the same impulse brought sit-ins to other southern states. A generation had been reared to expect that the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision truly spelled the end of segregation; by 1960, it was clear that popular action was necessary. Meanwhile, in northern cities, blacks and whites organized picket lines at local Woolworth's outlets. Within two months, sit-ins had been organized in fifty-four cities in nine states. The civil rights stalwart Ella Baker called a conference of sit-in activists; in April that conference organized the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to fight segregation through direct action.

And under the rotunda of San Francisco's City Hall, on May 13, another body of upstarts insisted on their right to attend hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee. Kept outside the hearing room, the demonstrators, most of them students, sat down in the rotunda and started to sing "We Shall Not Be Moved," a song of the Thirties. The police attacked them with high-pressure fire hoses, clubbed them, and hurled them down the marble steps, charging one demonstrator with a felony charge they could not, in the end, make stick. The anti-HUAC demonstrations also brought to the surface a tradition that had been in the making for several years: an underground stream combining Berkeley campus politics, local anti-HUAC sentiment, and the relatively strong local Communist Party and its fellow travelers.

Thinking to capitalize on the disruption, HUAC produced Operation Abolition, a film which scrambled footage and invented facts to present the Committee as the victim of a Communist-run campaign. Its soundtrack and pictures met at odd angles. Posing in front of a faked backdrop of the Capitol dome, Committee members with small-town demeanor spoke clumsily of "well-trained Communist agents" mobilizing their "dupes" to discredit the Committee, while their footage showed no such thing. Kept out of the hearing room, demonstrators chanted, "What are you afraid of?" and, "Open the doors!"—hardly signs of conspiracy or insurrection. The police, called "especially trained" (twice for good measure), looked brutal. The demonstrators, called "unruly," sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" and were shown being washed down the steps. To anyone not convinced that HUAC had the corner on truth, the unfriendly witnesses
sounded heroic. And so *Operation Abolition* proved a camp favorite and an inspiration to campus activists more than a cautionary tale. Civil liberties activists accompanied it to campuses, even refuted it with their own film, *Operation Correction*—pointing out along the way that one reason “identified Communists” had been present was that the Committee had subpoenaed them. But the refutation was scarcely necessary. The Committee radiated thickheadedness and ineffectuality; the anti-Committee Left stood for eloquence and humor. When liberal audiences heard the congressmen’s grade-B gangster movie lines and *Dragnet*-style melodramatic music, they laughed. The mere appearance of a Communist on the screen no longer provoked universal horror. The Committee could still punish—merely being served with HUAC subpoenas cost several San Francisco teachers their jobs—but it was losing its power to intimidate. The lumbering Committee had made a recruiting film for a New Left that barely existed.

Between the sit-ins and the anti-HUAC demonstration, the Fifties expired. The sit-ins were the main dynamo that powered the white movement, galvanizing the little nodes of opposition that had been forming in New York City, in the Boston and San Francisco Bay areas, in Chicago’s Hyde Park, in Ann Arbor and Madison—wherever the booming universities, thick with students, were promoting the value of reflection, cultivating intellectual alienation, and providing sites for both. The sit-ins could only have reverberated across the country (as did the news of San Francisco three months later, though less so) because there were already cultural and political enclaves, zones of negativity, which had withstood the leveling pressures of affluence and, now that McCarthyism was no longer in the saddle, were ready to move. But without the civil rights movement, the beat and Old Left and bohemian enclaves would not have opened into a revived politics. Youth culture might have remained just that—the transitional subculture of the young, a rite of passage on the route to normal adulthood—had it not been for the revolt of black youth, disrupting the American celebration in ways no one had imagined possible. From expressing youthful difference, many of the alienated, though hardly all, leaped into a self-conscious sense of opposition.

McCarthyism and the Old Left together had discredited the idea of a general multi-issue Left. The result was that the New Left made its appearance in the guise of single-issue movements: civil rights, civil liberties, campus reform, peace. But beneath was a common élan, a tangle of common principles, eventually a generational identity: New Left, meaning neither Old Left nor liberal. Over the next years, this opposition groped for a language and a way of understanding itself. Aiming to become a political force, it had to work out its relations to other forces—entrenched enemies, possible allies, and political parents. The black student movement had to come to terms with the bastions of the civil rights movement—the long-lived NAACP and the clergymen of Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The budding
white student movement had to feel out its relations to the Communist and social-democratic sectors of the Old Left, and to organized liberals. Both, crucially, had to figure out where they stood in relation to the Kennedy and then Johnson administrations. The history of what became the New Left in the early Sixties is in large part the history of these struggles for self-definition.

But first there had to be a movement: that which moves. The common chord in Greensboro and San Francisco was direct action. Following these precedents, what came to call itself “the movement” was a fusion of collective will and moral style. The movement didn’t simply demand, it did. By taking action, not just a position, it affirmed the right to do so; by refusing to defer, it deprived the authorities of authority itself. How did you “join” the movement? An old-fashioned question from unhip reporters and congressmen, to which the answer was: You put your body on the line. Actions were believed to be the guarantees and preconditions of ideas. The New Left’s first raison d’être was to take actions which testified not only to the existence of injustice but to the imperative—and possibility—of fighting it. The second was to take action in common, and to constitute, in here-and-now community, the future commonwealth itself. First, though, came the decision. The movement was not going to take evil lying down—this practical moralism was a good part of the movement’s appeal. As many studies have shown, most of the movement’s young people, black or white, took their parents’ liberal or radical values seriously. They tended to think that, in succeeding, their parents had failed—some by giving up, some by settling for material rewards, some by beating their heads against stone walls. Now they wanted to live out what their parents had repressed or abandoned.

This generation was haunted by history. They had been taught that political failure or apathy can have the direst consequences; they had extracted the lesson that the fate of the world is not something automatically to be entrusted to authorities. The red-diaper babies among them were often especially eager not to be cowed; their own passivity might confirm their parents’ defeats. The black students, whose parents and teachers had stood up firmly and quietly against the humiliations and terrors of white supremacy, had felt strong enough to stop putting up with the Jim Crow their parents had been forced to eat. Jews—but not the Jews alone—were not going to walk into any more gas chambers, or see any other good Germans go on about their business. All wanted to redeem their parents’ ideals in the face of their parents’ failures. All breathed the intellectual air of existentialism: action might not avail, but one is responsible for choosing. And so, from under the dead hand of history, they leaped to a paradoxical conclusion: that history was alive and open. Once touched by the example of others taking history into their own hands—there, Cubans, and here, in the American South, blacks—they took the leap of faith expressed in the words of one civil rights song:
One man's hands can't tear a prison down
Two men's hands can't tear a prison down
But if two plus two plus fifty make a million
We'll see that day come round
We'll see that day come round

Action in common was not just a means, it was the core of the movement's identity. An astonishing break with the mood of the Fifties, which counseled adjustment, acceptance, and moderation at every turn. In this sense, the New Left had a practice and a spirit before—or more than—it ever had an ideology. At its luminous best, what the movement did was stamped with imagination. The sit-in, for example, was a powerful tactic partly because the act itself was unexceptionable. What were the Greensboro students doing, after all, but sitting at a lunch counter, trying to order a hamburger or a cup of coffee? They did not petition the authorities, who, in any case, would have paid no heed; in strict Gandhian fashion, they asserted that they had a right to sit at the counter by sitting at it, and threw the burden of disruption onto the upholders of white supremacy. Instead of saying that segregation ought to stop, they acted as if segregation no longer existed. That was the definitive movement style, squarely in the American grain, harking back to Thoreau's idea of civil disobedience, to the utopian communards' idea of establishing the good society right here and now—but also to the pragmatists' insistence that experience is the measure of knowledge, and the do-it-yourselfers' (and entrepreneurs') belief in getting down to business.

**UNEASY IN AN ANTEROOM IN CAMELOT**

Small groups of scouts cracked the self-satisfaction of the affluent society and declared that history-making was their business. Now this spirit moved on to the issue to end all issues: the Bomb hovering just over the horizon. If it was possible to act on behalf of racial equality and civil liberties, wasn't there a chance that collective action could prevent the ultimate catastrophe?

Mickey Flacks, then a student at the City College of New York and later one of the early SDS cadre, recalls that in May 1960 someone—not the old-line left-wing student groups she knew—called a campus demonstration against a civil defense take-over drill. She expected that "the usual suspects" would show up to be counted. To her amazement, hundreds stayed aboveground to demonstrate. When a dean appeared to collect the offenders' registration cards, the demonstrators, instead of running away, crowded around him to make sure their cards were included. The Old Left remnants on campus had been fighting to keep
Nothing put the category *youth* on my own political map more resoundingly than a song called “Eve of Destruction.”

In August 1965, within five weeks after its release, “Eve of Destruction” surged to the top of the sales charts. It was, disk jockeys said, the fastest-rising song in rock history. Even in an age when commercial fads materialize overnight, a success like this was amazing. For “Eve of Destruction” took off while a good many stations were banning it—including all of the ABC network’s—and a good many others were playing it only infrequently. This was a song which a vociferous group of campus barnstormers called the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade said was “obviously aimed at instilling fear in our teenagers as well as a sense of hopelessness,” helping “induce the American public to surrender to atheistic international Communism.”

Written by a nineteen-year-old named P. F. Sloan, “Eve of Destruction” began with two funeral thumps of the kettledrum, leading into a pounding drumbeat. Then the surly voice of Barry McGuire ground out a thunder-and-brimstone sermon:

The Eastern world, it is explodin’
Violence flirtin’, bullets loadin’
You’re old enough to kill but not for votin’
You don’t believe in war but what’s that gun you’re totin’
And even the Jordan River has bodies floatin’
Then the refrain:

And you tell me over and over and over again, my friend,
You don't believe we're on the eve of destruction.

There had been no song remotely like this one in the decade-long history of rock music, although the objections of the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade suggest that here, at long last, was the song fundamentalists had been anticipating through all their years of panic, the one that would confirm their dire prophecies about the dark, inexorable logic of "nigger music." Nothing could have been in starker contrast to the previous year, 1964, when the Number 1 hits had included the Shangri-Las' "Leader of the Pack," the Beach Boys' "Deuce Coupe" and "California Girls," the Supremes' "Baby Love," and the Beatles' "A Hard Day's Night"—all bouncy. "Eve" was strident and bitter, its references bluntly topical—no precedent for that, not even in Bob Dylan's allegorical "Blowin' in the Wind." Its structure came from folk: simple guitar strum, repeated refrain, forced rhymes. With an off-balance rhythm, it wasn't much to dance to; it brooded. McGuire's voice started with a whimpers but got surlier as it went along, punctuated by the occasional ripping whine of a Dylan-esque harmonica. The all-purpose apocalypse took in the Bomb—"When the button is pushed there's no runnin' away/There'll be no one to save with the world in a grave"—and even civil rights, which by now, with the passage of the Voting Rights Act that spring, had become an apple-pie issue:

. . . Handful of Senators don't pass legislation
And marches alone can't bring integration
What human respect is disintegratin'
This whole crazy world is just too frustratin'
Look at all the hate there is in Red China
Then take a look around at Selma, Alabama . . .

Protest even engendered protest. An ad hoc group called the Spokesmen recorded an answer song, "Dawn of Correction"—which flopped.

The Christian Anti-Communist Crusade was on the right track about what the song implied, though wrong that its aim was to demoralize. Growing numbers of the young had to have been demoralized in the first place or they couldn't have relished McGuire's growsls. Students of popular culture later tried to downplay the significance of the lyrics,* but the

*A study of a sample of undergraduates at the time showed that only 14 percent understood the song's "total" theme; 44 percent understood it "partially." A junior college survey showed 76 percent interpreting the song correctly.
lyrics conveyed only part of the song’s meaning. Pop music devotees react to the mood of a song whether or not they grasp the lyrics. The sound carried the point: “Eve of Destruction” didn’t hold up with all-American high spirits; its drumbeat wasn’t martial but ominous.

If any doubt was left about what the song meant, the superintendents and interpreters of popular culture (including right-wing alarmists) went to work to clear things up. Shortly after “Eve of Destruction,” a hearty ditty called “Ballad of the Green Berets,” sung by Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler, rose to the top of the charts in March tempo with a display of rat-a-tat-tat. That fall of 1965, Chicago’s leading rock station sponsored a “battle of the Barrys,” McGuire versus Sadler. On the decisive day, listeners were invited to call in and cast a ballot for their favorite: “Eve of Destruction” or “Green Berets.” “Berets” won—by a single vote out of thousands cast. For promotion’s sake, at least, the programmers of WCFL knew there was circulation to be gained by hyping their contest as if an entire culture were at stake. Plainly a new constellation of moods was in the air. “Eve of Destruction” seemed to certify that a mass movement of the American young was upon us.

“I CAN’T GET NO” Not out of the blue, of course. Bob Dylan had groaned out his triptych of wasteland passions and rebellions for two years now, in the albums The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan and The Times They Are A-Changin’. The Zimmerman boy from up-country Minnesota had adopted a name that was both literary (the besotted and lyrical Dylan Thomas) and true-gritty American (Gunsmoke’s Marshal Matt Dillon), had gone to Greenwich Village and picked up a following with his folk anthems and antiestablishment gags. The tiny New Left delighted in one of our own generation and mind singing earnest ballads about racist murderers (“The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll”), the compensatory racism of poor whites (“Only a Pawn in Their Game”), Cold War ideology (“Masters of War” and “With God on Our Side”). Insiders knew Dylan had written the chilling “A Hard Rain’s Gonna Fall” during the Cuban missile crisis, evoking the end of the world; the anthem “The Times They Are A-Changin’” sounded like a musical version of the “new insurgency” rhetoric of America and the New Era. To make it all more marvelous, Dylan did all this not on the marginal, faintly do-it-yourself Vanguard or Folkways label, redolent of Pete Seeger and the fight against the blacklist, but on big-league commercial Columbia Records. Teased by the idea of a popular movement, we admired Dylan’s ability to smuggle the subversive into mass-circulated trappings. Whether he liked it or not, Dylan sang for us: we didn’t have to know he had hung out in Minneapolis’s dropout-
nonstudent radical scene in order to intuit that he had been doing some hard traveling through a familiar landscape. We followed his career as if he were singing, our song; we got in the habit of asking where he was taking us next.

It was a delight but not altogether a surprise, then, when Dylan dropped in on SDS’s December 1963 National Council meeting. We were beginning to feel that we—all fifty of us in the room—were the vibrating center of the new cyclonic Left. Alger Hiss came to visit the same meeting, and drew an ovation; Allard Lowenstein also dropped in, and sat in the corner, anonymous. Dylan arrived unceremoniously with a Mississippi civil rights lawyer, sat shyly in the back, listened to a discussion about our plans for community organizing, and said nothing. (We’d been alerted he was coming, and decided not to put him on the spot with a public introduction.) A recess came, and Dylan told a group of us he’d be interested in working in one of our incipient ERAP projects. (Too exciting to believe! This proved we were the center!) But Dylan warned us to be careful—of him. A few weeks earlier, just days after the Kennedy assassination, he told us, he had appeared at the banquet of the Old Leftish Emergency Civil Liberties Committee. He thought he’d been invited to sing; he didn’t know he was about to be given their Tom Paine Award. “Then I see these bald-headed, pot-bellied people sitting out there in suits,” he told us. He tanked up at the backstage bar, contemplated the assemblage, then “went crazy,” ranted that old people in furs and jewels should retire, announced that he could see some of himself in Lee Harvey Oswald, and stalked off the platform. He was half warning us, half apologizing for his bad-boy behavior.* In the meantime, Dylan said he would sing some benefit concerts for SDS. (But afterward he didn’t answer our letters or phone calls.)

Dylan wasn’t just putting on; or if his political commitment was a put-on phase designed to catapult him to stardom, as he said in a later and cynical incarnation, he was probably putting himself on as well. The woman he lived with on and off for years worked for CORE. He sang to Negroes in the Mississippi cotton fields (there is a touching sequence from this trip in the Pennebaker-Leacock documentary Don’t Look Back). He visited movement organizers in the mining country of eastern Kentucky, where he wrote “The Chimes of Freedom Flashing.” And so his next album, Another Side of Bob Dylan, struck the politicos as something of a personal betrayal, especially the line directed at the onetime lover: “I’ve heard you say many a time that you’re better than no one and no one is better than you/If you really believe that you know you have nothing to win and nothing to lose.”

*In another version of the Tom Paine Award episode, Dylan reworked the experience to sound purely and simply dismissive of the spectacle of ridiculous old-fart left-wingers: “All they can see is a cause, and using people for their cause.”
Through all this, Dylan’s albums were never big successes by American pop standards (they sold better in England). When two of his songs made the top ten—"Blowin’ in the Wind" and "Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right"—it was in sweetened versions by Peter, Paul and Mary. By contrast, the astonishing trajectory of "Eve of Destruction" signaled a new mentality on a grand scale, stretching far beyond Berkeley and Ann Arbor and Swarthmore and other havens of the educated. For popular music was suddenly brooding and snarling all over the place. That same month, folk’s princess, Joan Baez, broke into the hit parade for the first time in five years of recording, with an elegiacal Phil Ochs ballad called "There But for Fortune," which oozed universal compassion, included sympathy for winos, and referred to "the city where the bombs had to fall," which I took to mean Hiroshima. Dylan had just converted to electrified folk-rock—a few hundred purists (out of twenty thousand fans) had booed him off the stage when he unveiled the new style at the Newport Folk Festival in July—and his commercial instinct was rewarded: the folksinger who wanted to be a rock ‘n’ roll star finally burst through to Number 1 with the private, electric, rocked-up hostilities of "Like a Rolling Stone." His stylistic breakthrough made "Eve of Destruction" and all its folk-rock successors possible, in fact, by "dragging [folk] screaming," as Charlie Gillett writes, into the pop world, breaking the back of orthodox folk music in the process.

And if these sullen bursts weren’t enough, what they followed to the Number 1 spot were the grinding riffs of the Rolling Stones’ "Satisfaction," which announced its intent with a guitar lick that sounded like a sour buzz saw, and never stopped snarling. The verses were hard to understand—in fact they were digs at the banality of radio, TV, and advertising, if you could decipher them—but it was hard to miss the sexual insinuation of the repeated "I can’t get no satisfaction"; the interruptus of "And I try, and I try, and I try"; the dare and taunt in the stop-starting "I can’t get no —"; the strut of all kinds of pleasure-hungry, thwarted, ravaged and—what the hell—ravaging selves proclaiming once and for all that no one was going to stop them when they cruised into the world to get whatever it was they hadn’t gotten. Angrier than the Stones’ earlier blues, and far more popular in the States, "Satisfaction" was a cross-class yelp of resentment that could appeal to waitresses and mechanics and students, all stomping in unison. The Stones’ rough-rough bad-boy persona were as much a contrivance as the Beatles’ famous sweetness; with the help of clever counselors, the Stones discovered to their own satisfaction just how vast was the market for badness.