

## Module 05: 1968 — A Generation in Revolt?

### Evidence 36: Lessons From the Chicago Movement: David Dellinger on Chicago 1968

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#### Introduction

David Dellinger was a leader of the national pacifist movement and those opposing the war in Vietnam. The magazine he edited, *Liberation*, was a crucial voice in the radical pacifist movement. Unlike Hayden, Davis, and Abbie Hoffman, Dellinger was in his fifties and committed to non-violent resistance. In this excerpt, Dellinger reflects on the violence that occurred in Chicago.

#### Document

At one stage of the battle of Chicago, we spoke of the objective of the day as being survival without surrender. Thus, when faced with vicious attacks we held our ground as long as we could, retreated, regrouped and advanced again. Sometimes we returned in small groups and by circuitous routes to the area just vacated. Sometimes we moved into new areas, such as the streets or parks near the Hilton, where our impact would be greater or the furor of the police would be, if not restrained, at least recorded for the whole world to see.

The triumph of Chicago was the triumph of street protesters who displayed courage, imagination, flexibility and fraternal solidarity as they refused to knuckle under to the police. The role of centralized, formal leadership was minimal in these events. A crude but creative kind of participatory democracy was at work. The organic needs of the occasion, the interacting but spontaneous reactions of the participants, set the tone. Naturally these interacting reasons were based in large part on the experiences at previous protests (including what had happened a few hours or minutes earlier) and on myriad analyses and interpretations that make up the intellectual life of the Movement.

The tone was also influenced by which sections of the Movement came to Chicago and which strayed away. I wish that there had been a greater

turnout of people experienced in militant nonviolence – more, for example, who do not think it is revolutionary to taunt the police by screaming "oink, oink" or "pig" at them and who also are willing to experiment with the new mobile tactics which were developed in response to the Movement's greater sense of urgency. Nevertheless, despite romantic guerrillas, the violence of our side was minimal. Mostly defensive and discriminate, it was aimed at slowing down the advancing cops, holding liberated territory and protecting our people. If our aim had been to create indiscriminate havoc by burning, destroying or looting, does anyone think that we could not have done a better job of it? As Julius Lester wrote in the Guardian for September 7, "The demonstrations are also a testimony to the impact that nonviolent demonstrations can have. And anyone who criticizes the demonstrations for being nonviolent is foolishly romantic. The easiest thing to have done in Chicago would have been to commit suicide."

But the problem of having an increasingly cruel and irrational enemy that has contempt for human life and makes a cynical mockery of the democratic values it claims to believe in is the danger of becoming cruel and irrational oneself in the act of combating that enemy. Because "they" are vicious and wrong and "we" are humane and right, it is easy to conclude that whatever we do is justified. For the most part this did not happen in Chicago, but it has happened more than once in the history of revolutionary movements. And some of the conclusions people are drawing from the battle of Chicago point dangerously in that direction. One has only to talk to some of the participants – and to read some of the reports in the underground press which exaggerate and extol the violence of our side while forgetting to mention the reasons for our being there – to realize that it can happen here.

There is a heady sense of manhood that comes from advancing from apathy to commitment, from timidity to courage, from passivity to aggressiveness. Anyone who has been forced to yield ground or surrender his rights in the face of the superior force and legal backing of the occupying armies of the state would surely be thrilled to stand side by side with an aroused body of comrades in resisting the police assaults. Anyone who has stood helplessly by in a poor neighborhood while the police abused a suspect, or anywhere when his comrades in the movement were being taken off to kangaroo courts and jails could not but respond favorably to the occasions in Chicago when the police were denied their intended

victims.

There is an intoxication that comes from standing up to the police at last. There is an even greater sense of satisfaction that comes from feeling oneself a functioning part of a larger whole whose members act together not only to protect one another but to serve a larger purpose as well. All the things that William James wrote about in his famous essay on the need for a moral equivalent to war were at work among the resisters in Chicago. Ordinarily, a society which has frustrated the natural community of mankind and deprived its citizens of a more social purpose than money-grubbing offers them a counterfeit sense of community and national purpose in a holy war against a foreign enemy. In Chicago, for once, a generation which sees through the false idealism and ugly purpose of the U.S. aggression in Vietnam found alternate, more meaningful satisfaction in a heroic battle in which righteousness was clearly on their side. Now it is our responsibility to see that righteousness continues to be on our side, both in the objectives for which we continue to struggle and in the spirit and activities by moving backwards into the old-style nonviolence, which seemed content with symbolic actions and token victories even when war and oppression continued undiminished. But neither will it be achieved by falsely concluding that the need of the Movement is to stockpile weapons and increase the violence in the next encounter.

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To return to Chicago again, what if Mayor Daley's charge of unbearable insults and physical assaults by the demonstrators with cruel and unusual weapons had been true? That would not have justified the wanton savagery of the police. By the same token, the very real brutality of the police (of which we have not seen the last) and the underlying violence of the system do not mean that we will automatically advance the cause of social justice and respect for human dignity by letting street fighting become a substitute for political education, community organizing and the creation of counterinstitutions. If achieving political effectiveness is our goal, we had better not translate the new, heady mood into the illusion that we can defeat the police and the Army in a contest of violence. No one quite thinks that we can, at least when the question is raised that bluntly. But some of the loose talk about violence doesn't make much sense unless one assumes

that we can.

Source:

Walter Schneir, ed., *Telling It Like It Was: The Chicago Riots* (New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1969), 148-156.