

# SNCC 28th Anniversary Conference: Tom Hayden Remarks

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We Shall Not Be Moved: The Life and Times of SNCC 1960 - 1966 Conference

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Location: Trinity College - Hartford, CT

**Host:**

[\*\*Jack Chatfield\*\*](#), Professor of American History, Trinity College

**Speaker:**

**Tom Hayden**, Assemblyman, California, Freedom Rider

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**Jack Chatfield:**...the ghetto of Columbia as one might call it in those days. Mr. Tom Hayden, now a state assemblyman in the state of California.

**Tom Hayden:** Thank you. Being around all those explosions sounds like I was a dynamite cap or something. I'm glad to be here. I had wanted to come purely to see some old friends for the first time in a number of years, and historically, I was interested in coming because I've been doing some writing and some thinking of my own.

I don't think there's anything more crucial than personal accounts of history. And Jack prevailed on me to speak. I thought I was speaking to a class. How many of you are Trinity students? Are you in the class? Your class is here.

I am a member of the State Assembly, I think in my sixth year. I'm the chair of the Labor Committee and the Higher Education Subcommittee. So jobs and education are my great interests. And I like to say that I represent a district in Southern California that is not yuppies, but frumpys—formerly radical, upwardly mobile young professionals.

I'll take whatever questions you have. Was that not enough of an introduction? I can certainly start. Let me start. I was reading *Man's Hope*. Did you ever read *Man's Hope*? On the plane—this is a novel written 50 years ago, and I hope that some things that I've written could last 50 years as well.

This and *Man's Fate*, which is about the Chinese Revolution—this is about the Spanish Civil War—are the two best novels about revolution that I think have ever been written. And they're really great novels because they are novels, they're not political tracts.

But in this, I was reading this on the plane coming here, not knowing that there was any connection with this SNCC conference, but there actually is quite an interesting connection. Because during the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s, in which a popular social democratic government was toppled by a fascist movement led by Francisco Franco, supported by the Nazis and by [Benito] Mussolini's Italy, one of the immediate events precipitating World War II and the Holocaust and devastation for much of the planet. There was a failure on the part of the West—and the Soviet Union, for that matter—to defend Spain. And when Spain fell, it was an incentive for the Germans to begin to move their empire.

A number of people from around the world, including the United States, went to Spain, and they fought in Spain in the Lincoln Brigade and went through an experience which, for the [19]30s generation, was something like Vietnam and civil rights for the [19]60s generation. They could not rely on the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt to do the job for them and had to do it on their own. They were divided into many camps that are very similar in all movements.

There were pure anarchists who believed that all authority resided in the individual and all decisions had to be made in the whole movement by individuals alone, all the way over to members of the Communist Party who were highly structured and believed in top-down discipline and in a structured approach, and everything in between. And they couldn't agree on—they just couldn't agree on structure. They were defeated, split, overrun, and finally defeated, but they created a legacy for the next 50 years.

They created a standard of courage, a standard of sacrifice, and most of them who lived through the experience in Spain came back and organized in America—in teachers' unions and trade unions in general, in intellectual circles.

Not just [André] Malraux, but [George] Orwell, and every significant American intellectual of the 1930s who then dominated the next 20 years had some relationship to Spain. It was the touchstone of their lives when they were young, just as Mississippi was, as you heard last night, for many of us, or Vietnam was.

And in the course of reading this book, I came across a passage that I'll leave you with, that I thought was pretty universal. There are these two people in the Popular Front, and they're arguing whether or not you need in modern warfare and modern politics to rely on experts and technology.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Popular Front was a 1930s coalition of communists, socialists, and progressives united against fascism, which in the U.S. context supported New Deal reforms, racial justice, and labor rights, and significantly influenced politics and culture.

So they were up against mechanized warfare and an air force, and they had people who were building barricades in the streets with mattresses against airplanes. And it was an argument whether you need experts in technology or whether you need just the inspiration and the will of people. And as they're arguing about this out on the streets, the people are shouting "Salud" and singing revolutionary songs and marching around and preparing for the enemy to advance on Madrid. And this one fellow who's been convinced that you need experts says out the window—all you hear out the window is the apocalypse of fraternity.

In other words, everyone on the street was no longer living the life of business as usual. They were completely engulfed in this historical moment that they'd given their lives to. It was apocalyptic. And he said, the problem with apocalypse is that it clamors for everything right away. It's a fervor that spells certain defeat after a relatively short period, for a very simple reason—because it's in the very nature of an apocalypse to have no future, even when it professes to have one. Putting his pipe back in his pocket, he said sadly, "Our humble task, Mr. Magnan, is to organize the apocalypse."

That is, I would submit, exactly what happened also in the 1960s, and is a universal dilemma that's still with us today. We tried to organize the apocalypse. I don't think it can be done.

**Audience Question:** In [19]61 or [19]62, with the—not the downfall of SCLC [[Southern Christian Leadership Conference](#)], but more of the rise of the power of SNCC—the student movement got a lot of inspiration from SNCC. To what extent do you feel that your enthusiasm or idealism has changed with the changing attitudes in SNCC in [19]65 or [19]66?

**Tom Hayden:** What was the change in attitudes in SNCC? What does that have to do with my attitude?

**Audience Question:** Well, with the increasing attitude towards Black Power and anti-white racism. Did that change your attitude in any way?

**Tom Hayden:** I'm not sure that my attitudes were representative, but my attitudes were somewhat fluid. I think that a lot of the things that go on between people reflect what's going on in their context. And this moment, when the concept of integration had power, was closely related to the fact that we had a new president and there was a somewhat more hopeful context.

And as that soured, particularly after [John F.] Kennedy's death—and this is my opinion—the context became much more bleak. Even though people didn't recognize it overnight, it became soon clear that there wasn't going to be a country coming to the aid of the Black South unless triggered by confrontation and massive pressure.

And that meant that the idea of a human community or politics based on morality started to decline and was replaced by politics based on power—which is what politics is based on. In

other words, not expecting the federal government to move out of conscience, but expecting the federal government to move out of necessity. And once you arrive at that conclusion, that it's power versus power, it's a short step to whose power, whose interest—and then it becomes Black Power. So there's kind of an evolutionary logic to it.

It might not have happened in that way if the national context had not changed, and if Kennedy had remained president and had become more responsive to the movement. All those questions became academic in November 1963. Yes?

**Audience Question:** I'm wondering, from the perspective now, like 25 years or so, what you think today about your experience and the experience of the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society]. And then after that, what sort of lessons, if you will, do you think that sort of thing has to say to people who are interested in organizing today?

**Tom Hayden:** I'm not a big believer in lessons, because even if I could communicate across time and from one context to another, radically different contexts, even the words might not be understood by you in the same way that I use them. So I'm very skeptical about lessons. So I have no lessons for you, but on the first question, what happened?

**Audience Question:** What's your perspective now?

**Tom Hayden:** Of what happened? Well, it's very much, as I said, in *Man's Hope*. I mean, there was a belief that—it was one of those moments. I think they only come very rarely in American history, probably at the beginning of the American Revolution and on the eve of the Civil War, were two moments where movements arise that do not have simply in mind a specific demand with the right to vote, but circles of people come together who are possessed with a far more inspired vision that they can change the world and will. I don't know where that comes from. I have some, actually, some ideas, but nothing solid. But I think that only happens once or twice in a century, if that, and that's the way it was.

For whatever reason, young people came together and believed for at least a two-year period that we would change the world. That is heady stuff, that is far more than we would achieve civil rights, or we would reduce the military budget or something like that. Those were givens. It was going to be something far more than that.

There was a period of time when all this seemed quite true—[for] a year or two—and people gave their whole lives to it. They put their future out of the way. They cast themselves off from their families. They gave themselves to a movement. From that, they got purpose, a new family, a substitute community. They grew up together through that experience, enough income to live on or security—that room for \$1.50 [\$15.15 in 2025] at the YMCA that Bob was talking about.

Everything was provided, as long as you were willing to provide body and soul. And it was necessary. I don't think you could have gotten the catalytic energy, if you want to put it in physical terms—you couldn't have gotten the catalytic energy together to go into Mississippi and confront the violence of the state without such a community. Nobody who worked in an office, as opposed to a community, was going to take the office to Mississippi on an afternoon and crash into the wall of segregation, because it was an axiom that you would probably die. So you had to have something around you strong enough to take the fear of death and dissipate it and that was this community.

This was how [SDS](#) [Students for a Democratic Society] was born as well. Much of SDS started in the South, not in Ann Arbor alone. I spent those two years in the South, and a purpose was served. We were the catalyst for a great many reforms, some of which we didn't accomplish ourselves, but we started. And that was the function, I think, that we performed. It was a temporary function, but an all-important function.

Some of it was aborted because of events that were out of our control—the killing of the two Kennedys, Dr. King, Malcolm X. Those killings cast a question mark over the whole enterprise, over what might have happened. A friend of mine said, "We all became might-have-beens."

After serving that initial function, I think a number of things set in. But primarily, it's very difficult to sustain a revolutionary commitment without roots for very long, without either becoming unrealistically radical or burning out, or starting to realize that you can't perfect the human being before society changes and getting too hard on each other.

So we started thinking we could change the whole world, and within six years, realized we couldn't even hold our own organization together. It was a very humbling and devastating experience for a lot of people.

**Audience Question:** If organizing the apocalypse was the way to answer, then how do you feel about working within the system and which method you think is more frustrating?

**Tom Hayden:** I don't think you have any choices under that. The apocalypse happens now and then. Maybe it happens to you sometime—just a fever comes. I think it has to do with people being left outside the system for long enough and having serious grievances that are not addressed, and starting to throw off that hatred of self that usually goes with being oppressed, and starting to replace that with pride.

And then some fearless young people step forward, and everybody follows. That happens. That'll happen again. I don't know when it will happen, but that happens. What he's saying in this book is that when you're in that situation, trying to organize that consciousness is virtually impossible.

In the meantime, working within the system always has some utility. And I don't think there's any handbook on social change, you know? I don't. I no longer believe in the catechism of what is the right way to affect social change, because it usually happens in surprising ways, unexpected ways.

The other thing that's quite important—it's almost one of the reasons it's hard to have any lessons—all these people were talking last night, I realized, were talking from a context that is utterly and radically and permanently different than your context. You cannot underestimate how important it was that no Black person in the South could vote and no college student in America could vote.

In other words, the two active constituencies did not have the option of working in the system open to them. I could not vote until I graduated from the University of Michigan when I was 21 years old. So all during those four years, I was a student, an editor, expressing my opinions, yelling at the administration, picketing—those were the only choices I had. The choice was to do nothing versus speak out outside the system. There was no inside the system. Civil disobedience and speaking out were the options open.

Today, I suppose to most people, civil disobedience seems strange if you haven't first voted and tried to work within the system. You know what I mean. So it's a hopelessly different context. And I think, as a rule—this is a Hayden law of social change—that you should work within the system as far as possible, and where it fails, to go outside the system. But not knowing where it will be, not knowing how far you can go—not having a dogma about how far you can take things.

**Audience Question:** In most of the accounts of the death of Robert Kennedy, they describe you in the back of St. Pat's [referring to St. Patrick's Cathedral] weeping. I wondered if you would comment on Robert Kennedy. Were you weeping for Robert Kennedy, or for America? Was Robert Kennedy something special in 1968, or what?

**Tom Hayden:** Robert Kennedy was an important figure in this whole period. He had gone from the anti-communist legal counsel of Senator [Joseph] McCarthy to his brother's Attorney General, to negotiator with the Freedom Riders, telling [Diane Nash](#), who sat here last night, to please cool it and call off the Freedom Rides. And with his brother, telling the Black leadership not to have the [March on Washington](#). I know it was John Kennedy, and I assume Robert, but the Kennedy brothers asked them not to have the March on Washington in August 1963.

On the other hand, they were destined to be linked to us. They did make phone calls. They did work through the night on many occasions, trying to mediate or get people out of jail. It was that we had a very complicated relationship. When I was beaten up with Paul Potter in McComb, Mississippi, in 1961, the next day I was in Washington at the Justice Department. I met with Kennedy's top aide, Burke Marshall, who is still a distinguished person in the same field.

And he said, after we recounted how horrible it was down in Mississippi, that he and the Attorney General had a request of me. And I asked what that was. They said, "Could you persuade the SNCC workers to leave Mississippi?" I said, "What? Why?" They said, "We can't protect them. They'll be killed." I said, "I know they'll be killed, but this is the United States government. We have a Constitution that goes border to border. You're telling me that the Constitution can't be enforced in some parts of the country?"

And he kind of held up his hands like that and said that while I was right, morally or in principle, the fact was that they couldn't enforce it, and their advice and their request was that I try to urge the SNCC people to leave the state. Well, imagine urging [Chuck McDew](#), who you heard last night. "Chuck, I was talking to the Attorney General's office, and they want you to leave the state." It's impossible.

But it was a relationship in which the Kennedys, particularly Robert Kennedy, grew in their understanding. And after John Kennedy's death, I think Robert Kennedy was spiritually radicalized, and came to see the nature of fate and the nature of tragedy and the nature of commitment, and began to be curious about people who were willing to sacrifice their lives for social justice, whether it was in South Africa or in Mississippi.

And I had begun meeting with him in February 1967 about racism and particularly about the war. And it was clear that he was contemplating a run for the presidency. But before that, he had to contemplate speaking out against the Vietnam War. He had not spoken out very forcefully, even through the first of 1967.

And what I realized—at first, I thought he was pragmatically trying to find a common ground position. Then I realized he was really wrestling with the moral responsibility that he and his brother had gotten us into the war and dragged a lot of people into it, and now had to justify going the other way. And he did, in [19]67 and [19]68. And he became much more of a free spirit as he cast off traditional advisors and decided to run for the presidency.

He had crowds in places like Iowa that nobody had seen since—until Jesse Jackson today. The New Left didn't trust him.<sup>2</sup> I remember Bob Scheer, my friend at *Ramparts*, writing that he was so seductive that he was a bigger enemy than the right-wingers. The Eugene McCarthy people couldn't stand him because they liked McCarthy, who was a politician who was not political. He was a good government type. And Bobby Kennedy came out of Boston and New York and had these ties to these ethnic political machines and was seen as ruthless.

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<sup>2</sup> The New Left refers to a broad political movement that emerged primarily in the 1960s and 1970s, made up mostly of young activists, students, and intellectuals who sought radical social change, but rejected the traditional Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy and labor-focused politics of the "Old Left."

But he touched something in the country, and he touched something in me, because he was the only person, in my view, who could connect with the Irish working-class hard-hat constituency that my family came from and the Black poor that I was working among. And I think a president has to be able to touch both to achieve greatness and to achieve success.

When he died, the incident you're referring to did happen. I was in New York and went over to the church, and we went in, and they were just building the platforms for the funeral. And we discovered that the coffin had just come in. So there were a few of us there, and we stood an honor guard.

And I don't think the answer to your question is that I wept for Robert Kennedy or cried for my country. I think it was a numbing experience—that bullet killed hope. I didn't just kill a person. I think you can only take so much of that. And so much of the [19]60s was that—was seeing your best potential leaders shot. So that even—I think I was 27, which meant I was 22 when John Kennedy was killed, 27 when King and Robert Kennedy were killed.

It meant for me—and I was a little older in the movement—it meant that the best political possibilities of our lifetimes were already behind us, and we were not yet 30. And that's an awful prospect to face at 21, 22, 23 years old, and feel that for sure you've already seen your best possibilities come and go. And that experience, I think, was pervasive in our generation.

**Audience Question:** I was listening to [Howard Zinn](#) last night, and he was explaining how the Civil Rights Movement just didn't come out of Rosa Parks being tired didn't come out of nowhere. And I've been reading James Miller's book on SDS, and it seems like Al [Alan] Haber was just in sort of a political mood at the time, and that's sort of what spurred things on. It seemed—the way he describes it, it did come out of nowhere.

And I was also wondering if you would know, or have any clue as to why, back then, students would be sort of roving all around the country to different campuses, trying to stir things up. And now students seem—they're staying at home. You know, there aren't really any nationwide student organizations.

**Tom Hayden:** I didn't hear my friend Howard Zinn's comment, but I guess he was saying that there were organizers who were quietly organizing and holding workshops, and Rosa Parks attended one, and that gave her the skills and the consciousness. So she sat down in the bus. And I agree with that, but a lot of people sat down on buses.

I suppose—I know a lot of people tried to register to vote, and the mystery remains: why that day, that person? Because a lot of Rosa Parks' went through those workshops, right? And they didn't sit down on buses. So anybody that tries to penetrate to the inside of history, I wish them well, but I think there is an element of magic and spark and spontaneity to it that's unexplainable.

On the question of why there's no national student movement today? I don't know. It may have something to do with no single cause.

**Audience Question:** There are lots of causes.

**Tom Hayden:** Lots of causes sometimes can be the enemy of organization. Usually, organization is an attempt to maximize your resources around a simple objective, and if you have multiple objectives, it dissipates your resources. Like, I'm working in California on a hundred fronts, and the more fronts I work on, the weaker I am on each one of them. If I have the same resources, I've got a lot of staff, and I chair an organization that knocks on 600,000 doors a year in California. So, a lot of people.

If we were always working on one thing, we'd accomplish that. But we're so utopian—we're always taking on 20 things at once, which means we do half as well in all of them as we would if we only did one. So having a lot of causes is maybe not as positive a factor as we think. I don't know.

I have some feeling that the fact that you can vote and that students are treated relatively as adults, whereas we were treated as infants—you can do things. Student government at UCLA is like a big patronage system. They have hundreds of thousands of dollars, and the different ethnic groups on the campus fight over it like it's New York in 1911. It used to be that student government was totally a sandbox—didn't have a budget. A lot of energy gets absorbed in the system of the campus system, at least in the California campuses.

Also, the job pressure is terrible today. And I'm not sure a student movement can answer that, but that's really what's on students' minds. Are they going to get a good job and a good wage? And it seems that the only way to ensure some kind of material success for yourself is to study like crazy. And so if you protest, if you get active in something, that puts you at a competitive disadvantage next to the other person who's trying to get a good grade.

Why is that different than the [19]60s? Partly because we didn't care as much about that. Because the economy, believe it or not, was relatively good. In Ann Arbor, you could leave school for a year, get arrested in the South twice, come back and use that as a credential for getting into law school. [They'd] think that you were—this was a career step. If you advised that to somebody today, they'd think that you have checked out from the human race.

How you build a student movement that takes into account the economic worry when students aren't yet in the economy, I don't know. And then the last thing I've noticed—I haven't attended it, but I've noticed—is that there are a lot of these ideological groups that show up at all the meetings, probably some here.

And Abbie Hoffman said in the [19]60s that ideology is a brain disease, which is an Abbie Hoffman overstatement, but there is a certain tendency for highly charged, highly politicized groups that have doctrines and newspapers to back up those doctrines to show up at all large meetings of anything and fight with each other over obscure ideological arguments. And that can really destroy the entry ability of new people into a movement.

If they have to not only have a position on apartheid—which maybe they've been wrestling with—but then they have to have a position on Albania, and on the Korean Olympics, and on the crash of the 007, and on the Sandinistas, and on 13 other causes—the Palestinians—they drift out because they can't handle the overload.

Building a movement has to be simple. You've got to get people to come in at the level they're at. And if you ask them too many questions, they just leave. Far in the back. How about just “yes,” “no” questions now?

**Audience Question:** I wanted to say one thing. What you said about Robert Kennedy was very interesting to me, but I think it's also important for students to realize, if you read any of the books or the studies on the Civil Rights Movement, that Robert Kennedy was the Attorney General who refused to send adequate federal protection to the South, and therefore a lot of civil rights workers were brutalized more than they would have been, and killed in some cases. And that Kennedy was the guy who was used for his first two or three years as Attorney General to really take decisive action. And I'm sure that the SNCC workers who are here would support that view.

Also, I wanted to say that I think there is a national student movement today, although if you look for why it's not like it was in the [19]60s—of course it's not the same. But they're all over the country. Lots of students are being arrested on college campuses, opposing CIA recruitment on campus, and in lots of other campus struggles. And I think it's sort of inaccurate to think that there is no student movement today. It is not what it was in the 1960s, but that's not what we need either.

But I had a question as well. And the question was—and I think in the 1960s—I wasn't very old then, but I studied the [19]60s and the movements of that time. And one of the things that seems very clear about it was that there were a lot of international trends in terms of looking to independent African countries and other international struggles, especially as the Vietnam War grew larger. And it seems to me that that kind of focus—the internationalism—really should be retained in some fashion. Not that we should be tied to other countries.

So I wanted to ask Mr. Hayden about what his opinions are about the current uprising in the West Bank and Gaza, and whether he has any second thoughts on his trip in 1982 to entertain the Israeli troops during their invasion of Lebanon.

**Tom Hayden:** I think I said, if you could hear, that Robert Kennedy wasn't always there. I said that the Justice Department tried to get people to leave the South.

On the second question, I think it is true that there are a lot of student activities around the country, and I regret if I sounded like there weren't, but there's no student movement like there was in the [19]60s. And I don't think there will be, because I don't think things repeat that easily or that often, but there are a lot of things going on. It's true.

On the international issue, I think it cuts both ways. I think that the Vietnam War obviously galvanized a whole generation one way or another. I think there was a tendency toward over-involvement in foreign revolutions in the [19]60s that detached many of us from ordinary Americans and got us off track as well. So I think internationalism cuts both ways. Remember, it wasn't remote internationalism that moved people in the [19]60s. It was the fact that they were seeing death and destruction and burning of villages on television, and young men were being drafted. So it was very at home.

On the last issue you raised, I'm not quite sure of the linkage between all of these points. I'm very opposed to the Israeli policies of occupation on the West Bank and Gaza, and I've been there about 14 times.

**Audience Question:** Before we sound the funeral bells for the student activists, let me just say that maybe there isn't a broad, coherent movement, but maybe that's a good point in some way. First of all, in the early [19]80s, some people were upset about apartheid. What we did—a lot of students across the country—was argue for divestment. We've been successful in a lot of ways. That's probably why we continue to be one in that path to most schools.

Second of all, we were quite active on Central American policy. Last year, I was down in Washington—hundreds of thousands of people were there. That was an example of further activism. So maybe what we've been doing now is focusing on certain issues, not trying to change the whole world, but trying to focus on issues and making some substantial changes. So maybe by not trying to—well, we, I like to change the world—to think about it, but maybe we could, by focusing on issues. There are good advantages to it.

**Tom Hayden:** I agree with you. I'm just saying that there's no such thing today as a million students on strike, paralyzing 500 universities. I mean, that's what was going on. Ronald Reagan at one point—you know, the guy who now says, "Stand tall"—he closed all universities in California before the protests began. He just closed them down because he saw it coming. All of them. We don't have anything like that.

The second point is that you are right in terms of the divestment movement having been spectacularly successful, campus by campus or city by city, and even in the United States Congress. And it reflects a new issue, a new approach, and new times.

Third, I think it's very important that images of past movements not dominate the minds of people who are trying to build movements in the present. That's why I'm always reluctant to offer lessons or talk about the past, because it interferes. And hopefully, the [19]60s are far enough behind us that every student in America was born after the [19]60s, so that they won't have to have images of the [19]60s interfering with the way they look at the [19]90s.

**Audience Question:** Can you tell us the authors of the two books that you mentioned?

**Tom Hayden:** *Man's Hope* and *Man's Fate*, André Malraux—M-A-L-R-A-U-X. He was a student activist in Indochina in the [19]20s. He was thrown out of Cambodia under French rule and had the newspaper that was supporting Vietnamese nationalism closed down in Saigon. He was the editor of it. He wound up fighting in the Spanish Civil War, and 60 years later, he was a conservative Minister of Culture in France. These novels were written 50 years ago. They're great novels.

**Audience Question:** When students [indistinct] and everyone is apathetic, they're working on divestment. That's not really what the sentiment is. And I assume that in the [19]60s, that's not what the SDS was told. Do you feel that you had a better sense of your place in the continuum of social change?

**Tom Hayden:** We felt—talking about early [19]60s—I'm an old guy. I went to Ann Arbor from 1957 through [19]61, not during the times when everybody was a hippie and everybody was a radical. So we felt that we were alone and different, and that we were a 1% of the campus that had to wake up the 99%. And we went through the same strange looks and abuse that you're talking about.

What was bizarre as I look back on it—and I'm proud of it, but it was bizarre—was, despite the fact that we were one to ten percent of the campus, we were convinced that in a very short while, we would change the whole world, despite the fact that the numbers were all the other way in 1960–61.

**Audience Question:** You said before something about students being on the outside. I think that's true, but I was just wondering if you would comment on the point you made about the draft. That although students were on the outside politically, they were very much on the inside in terms of really being brought into the system with the draft. And I just wondered if you would comment on the significance of that.

**Tom Hayden:** The draft was very significant. If I commented, I would just be reiterating what you're saying. It was very significant. Those who want to reduce the protest to the draft are wrong, though. There are some people who want to rewrite the history of the anti-war movement and say that all those people were trying to do was save their asses from being drafted.

And that accounts for the apathy today, because students are not being drafted. But it wasn't so. I mean, there were before, during, and after the coming and going of the draft, all sorts of anti-war explosions. But it was a factor.

**Audience Question:** I mean, in terms of perhaps galvanizing the moral energy. It seems to me that if students today—I often get this question myself—sort of, "How do you make it real for you?" And I think to some extent, it did make it real, even for people who weren't being drafted. It was something that the system could really do to you.

**Tom Hayden:** It's true. Yes, you couldn't vote, but you could be drafted into an army and get killed in Vietnam. That did get your attention. This is true.

**Audience Question [Danny Lyon]:** Tom, [Danny Lyon](#).

**Tom Hayden:** Danny Lyon.

**Danny Lyon:** How are you?

**Tom Hayden:** How are you?

**Danny Lyon:** Still alive.

**Tom Hayden:** Good. I toast you to that.

**Danny Lyon:** I'm interested in photography, and part of this conference, I think, has to do with history. And they tape everything. What's the real story of the photograph that was made of you—I think in [19]61, you're like this on the ground. I saw it in the *Chicago Maroon*. It led me...it was one of the steps for me into the movement. So, a guy with a fashionable sleeveless sweatshirt is getting hit over the head?

**Tom Hayden:** That's Carl Hayes.

**Danny Lyon:** Is he a friend of yours?

**Tom Hayden:** No, I haven't met him. The picture you're referring to is the picture that made me famous. I was with Paul Potter, who was a National Student Association President. We went down to Mississippi in October 1961 because there were phone calls coming from the SNCC office that indicated that some killings and some mayhem were near—were at hand. The police and rabid segregationists were trying to get into Mr. Noble's Cleaners on DeSoto Street, which is in McComb.

And Bob Moses needed other people who were hiding among the clothes and trying to call out. And Paul and I had this idea, which was approved by SNCC, that we should try to go to

Mississippi and do a quick report and take it to the Justice Department and try to write something for the national press to get protection.

So we went down, and as I said earlier, we were there just briefly, but what happened is we tried to go through this role of being reporters. So we stayed at the Camellian Motel in McComb. And alternately, we would go to see Chief Guy and Oliver Emmerich, the police chief and the editor of the paper, and they would rave and rant to us about these SNCC workers, McDew and Zellner in particular, who they wanted out of town or worse.

And then we would go to meet with McDew at night. You'd have to hide in the back of a car and be driven to a gas station and then switch to another car and go to a house with curtains pulled and blankets nailed over windows so that nobody could see that a meeting was going on—a meeting about voter registration—because the house would be blown up if they saw this.

And when those students that McDew was talking about last night had that march from [Burglund High School](#), Paul and I followed in a car. And to make a long story short, we were ripped out of the car and beaten up by this guy, Carl Hayes, who was the local—I don't know, listed as an electrician—and a photographer took these pictures of our being beaten up, or my being beaten up.

**Audience Question:** Was he with you?

**Tom Hayden:** No, no, I'll never know him. He saved my life because he came up to me after the beating, and he whispered, "Get out of your motel. They're going to come there tonight." And at the same time, with a quick gesture, he took the film out of his camera and put it in his socks. He just put it down. And sure enough, the police confiscated the camera, and he sent the photos out, and they appeared on the national wire all over the country the next day. And we were taken down to City Hall and told that we could stay in jail a long time as vagrants, or we could leave. So we left because we were going to try to go to Washington to the Justice Department.

I went back with Casey [Hayden], who you'll hear later, who was my wife at the time, just this last year, down to McComb because I wanted to retrace the place. And McComb has grown from 10 to 14,000, and the ghetto is still there, and Mr. Noble is still there. And he still speaks fondly of the SNCC workers, and he's still got the cleaners, and everybody in town is registered, and Burglund, which was the segregated school for Blacks, is now the only integrated school in the town.

I went to see the chief of police to see if he was still alive, and he had died about six years ago. And so I said, "I'd like to see the chief." And this fellow comes out, all decked down in military accouterments. And I said, "I'm Tom Hayden. I had the hell beat out of me 25 years ago down here, and I just wanted to see if things had changed and what had happened." And he said, "Oh yeah, the church bombings, that doesn't happen anymore."

And I said, "Well, good." And he said, "That was all caused by those Yankees." And then I said, "Well, you're looking at one right now." And I said, "I just want to know one thing. Is it a fairer system now than it was?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Does that make your job easier?" He said, "Yes." I said, "That's all I want to know."

So I left. And just on leaving town, we tried to call Carl Hayes, the guy who beat me up. I knew he'd be in the phone book. And I called up, and Carl wasn't in. I called back, kept leaving messages that Tom Hayden wanted to see him. And finally, I had to go, so I said that I'd call him the next time I'm back in Mississippi. But I'm sure he would remember me and that I'd like to have a word with him. And that's where it was left.

**Danny Lyon:** And you don't know who the photographer was?

**Tom Hayden:** No, just magic. People show up at the right time. I don't know how these things happen. He was there. He needed to be there.

**Audience Question:** Dr. Hayden, was your life changed in any fundamental way resulting from your work with the poor Blacks in the South?

**Tom Hayden:** Yeah, I would say totally. I wanted to be a foreign correspondent or newspaper editor. And actually, I was the editor of the college paper, and I was supposed to go to the Washington bureau of the *Detroit News*, which is where my family wanted me to go. At least if I wasn't going to be a doctor or lawyer, they wanted me to be a journalist. And Georgia and Mississippi changed all of that.

My outlook was changed to view—almost overly romantically, I suppose—but to take the view that the people who were considered to be excluded and at the bottom and the least qualified actually knew more about reality than college students with degrees. And that no movement for justice or political movement could be complete until it included opportunities for the poor, and that the poor would have to play a role in that movement.

And so I never went back to a conventional career, ever. And I suffered a 15-year break with my father, who wouldn't speak to me for all those years. He could not understand how he had created a person who went to college, got a degree, and went to Mississippi, Georgia, and Newark [NJ] to work among Blacks. It just didn't make any sense.

So a great price was paid in terms of my own family as well as my worldview. It's a price that was painful, but I think it happened to a great many people. I came out of it, and my family came out of it, I think, stronger and with a far richer life than if I was editing copy at the Paris bureau of the *Detroit News*. So I'm glad for it.

**Audience Question:** Another follow-up question. What prompted you to realize that your views of Southern Blacks may have been overly romantic?

**Tom Hayden:** I just think that there's a tendency when you're committed and you're isolated—committed to a struggle, and you're isolated from your friends, you're isolated in the media—you tend to necessarily romanticize what you're doing and perhaps overstate it. I don't mean in any significant way that I regret, but that just a tendency to develop a mystique about how important you are and the people that you're working for are, that reinforces itself and protects you against the world that has rejected you. Is this ending?

**Audience Question:** Your comment that you were isolated...from the meeting, and that is one of the ingredients that got you to be overly romantic. My comment is that it's very healthy to be isolated from most of our meetings. Very healthy.

**Tom Hayden:** Well, I didn't mean it that way, ma'am. I meant that the media is supposed to be covering reality. And if you think what's going on here is very important and it's not covered, you tend to feel that the issues you care about are not getting recognition. That's all I meant.

**Audience Question:** Can you reflect a little bit on what happened in the states, where SDS went from more sober voices like you and Carl [indistinct].

**Tom Hayden:** I was never a sober voice.

**Audience Question:** The same thing happened with SNCC, where it became much more ideological towards the end of this. Why do you think that happened?

**Tom Hayden:** I don't know. I think these were clearly temporary organizations suited to a specific historical purpose, you know, to give expression to something that needed expression. But they were not bureaucracies. They were communities of martyrs.

There was no—I mean, there were always people saying, "We have to build for the long haul," and they were respected, but nobody knew what they meant. Because if you don't believe you have a future, how can you build for the long haul? And it's hard to believe you have a future if you're facing death and destruction every day. So the organization usually follows the structure, follows the temperament of the people who are being served by the organization.

And this was, as I said at the beginning, a time of apocalypse, and apocalypse inevitably contains no future. And so the organization was only designed for the apocalypse, and that's fine. I don't think it could have been otherwise. Just the way it was.

See, other organizations don't rise out of an apocalypse. Somebody says, "I want to build an organization around an agenda." An agenda is a more sterile concept by far. You can build for a long time around an agenda, because inevitably, to achieve an agenda takes a long time. So people who are inspired to join that kind of thing will stay a long time.

But if you say what you heard these people say last night, they were talking in their 1960 mode. They were saying, "You did what you had to do, when you had to do it." And, I mean, [\[Bob Zellner\]](#) was ready to march out of here if he could find the target last night. Well, that's what I mean by an apocalyptic, spontaneous attitude. I mean, he'll stay around a long time, but you can't organize an organization...it'd be like trying to turn a volcano into a skyscraper. The structure doesn't fit the purpose. The volcano is erupting, and that's why it's a volcano. You can't make it a—

**Audience Question:** Do you think the people [indistinct] more militant leaders of SNCC? Were they not apocalyptic? Were they of just a different mode, then?

**Tom Hayden:** You're mixing too many groups together. You'll hear more on the SNCC evolution in today's panels. I think, in my view, that had to do as much with the killing of Kennedy, the escalation of war in Vietnam, and the neglect of domestic issues as it did with things internal to SNCC. But you'll hear about that.

As far as SDS was concerned, the organization was so voluntary and so idealistic and so spontaneous that its structure was never stable. So if a little group wanted to penetrate and take it over, it was fairly easy. All you had to do was stay longer at meetings. And they did that.

But those groups' only purpose—see, form follows function—their only purpose was to take over SDS. They had no larger purpose, like a fungus on a dying body. So they took it over. But as they took it over, it died. So then they disappeared. Maybe they're still around, but I never heard of Progressive Labor after they, quote, "took over" SDS, because it satisfied their hunger and their vision there was nothing further to do, so they perished into smaller and smaller subgroups. It's hard to take over something that's just unorganized. We're going to close this down. I think this will be the last question.

**Audience Question:** Did you feel then, or do you feel now, looking back in retrospect, that the lack of links with the older left and the trade unions—sort of people who got their organizing experience based on working-class organizing—but lack of those links was one of the problems? Or how do you assess that?

**Tom Hayden:** Sure, the lack of those links was a problem. But the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organization] at the time, was not yet in the forefront of civil rights in the South, and they were strong proponents of the war in Vietnam. So you found your allies where you found them. It was a tragedy.

**Audience Question:** [indistinct].

**Tom Hayden:** I'm not sure. They were so small at the time that to pursue a coalition with them would have been—I think it would have been off track. I mean, to see that as a big goal would have been off track, in my view. But that has to do with a whole lot more controversial subjects.

I have some real questions about whether the Left with a capital "L" has any clear historical function in American society. It's the only society with a capitalist economy that doesn't have a large Left, aside from South Africa. And there must be a reason for that. I don't know what it is. But where the Left in the kind of society we live in has had a measure of power has been primarily in Western Europe and, to some extent, Canada—in advanced capitalist societies—not the United States. And I think that will continue to be so.

This is not a view I held in the 1960s. Although I was a maverick, I was very uncomfortable with the idea of our being a "New Left." I knew we were new, but I didn't know if we wanted to be a Left. But I was convinced that that was the way to go. Now I think that a lot of thought has to be given to why, since the 1930s, there's been so little space in the American spectrum for an organized or institutional Left.

It may have to do with the absence of agreement on what "Left" means. It may have to do with the role of the Democratic Party in co-opting potentially radical forces into its midst. It may have to do with the fact that we have the lowest level of trade unionism of any advanced society—15, 16%. It may have to do with an individualistic middle-class ethic that, in its extreme form, is what American culture is all about. I don't know. I just have come to that conclusion. I'm not happy with it, necessarily, but it's my conclusion.

Which doesn't mean that there won't be populist movements or progressive movements of all kinds. There will be, and there are. You can see it in the Jackson campaign. You can see it in the campus efforts that were mentioned earlier. America has had a lot of history of militant populist movements and progressive movements, but has not been able to duplicate the spectrum—including the Left—that you see in Western Europe, for whatever reason.

I'd like to just end with one other thought. Sometimes the people who are the prophetic minority or the moral vanguard don't always get to see the fruits of their undertaking. Their function was to break down the walls of segregation, but not necessarily to survive and prosper and build.

One thing I noticed this past year that shows a legacy, though, that's very instructive is that when Bork was defeated for the Supreme Court, there is no doubt that the one and only reason Bork was defeated and rejected was because of the voter registration drives and the civil disobedience of 25 years ago, which enfranchised Blacks in the South, which made it necessary for politicians of all parties to seek Black votes, and which made it inevitable that they would cast a "no" vote on Bork, who stood for rolling the clock back on all those 25 years of progress.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This passage argues that the defeat of Robert Bork's 1987 Supreme Court nomination was a direct legacy of the civil rights movement—particularly the voter registration drives and civil disobedience of the 1960s—which empowered Black voters in the

So it takes a long time, and it comes in surprising and unexpected ways, but there are long-term results from these efforts of a few relatively invisible people. Thank you very much.

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South and forced politicians to be accountable to a more progressive, multiracial electorate that would not tolerate a rollback of civil rights gains.