

1968: The Chicago Convention

Perspectives John Teevan August 9, 2024

The Democratic convention in Chicago was a circus of violent disagreement entirely within the Democratic Party in 1968. The announcement (Feb 28) by President LBJ (Johnson) that he would not seek reelection due to the Vietnam war (and severe criticism from Sen Gene McCarthy), the many street protests against the war, and the assassination of the likely candidate, Bobby Kennedy (June 5 in LA), were all factors. There were primaries but the 'smoke filled rooms' seemed effective. Vice President Hubert Humphry, an effective leader of the Senate from Minnesota, entered the race too late for the primaries but still became the likely candidate. It was almost 60 years until those smoke-filled rooms returned.

Chicago was ripe for troubles. Chicago already had riots in April when MLK was assassinated. Now Ground Zero was Grant Park and the Chicago Hilton overlooked the park. The convention itself was in the immense and airconditioned International Amphitheater on 42nd Steet at the Union Stock Yards.

After two brief summer jobs at Illinois Tool Works and in an office next to the Des Plaines Theater (not far from the first McD), my Dad arranged for me to apply to be a convention usher. The Andy Frain agency had the contract for all Chicago athletic and arena events. Sound odd? Think Mayor Daley. How did I get the job? My dad knew a guy and I was Irish and over six feet tall. I was issued an old double-breasted blue uniform that also served as my ID to get in. August 26-29 was hot and there was security on the Dan Ryan expressway plus new chain link fences to keep people from throwing rocks onto traffic. The Projects were still in full use on the east side of the Dan Ryan. It stood as an indictment of the inhumane social planning of the day.

Inside there was a primitive magnetic ID system to limit movement but it failed. I worked part of the immense press section. One morning a lady walked through the hallway in my section. No ID tag. I challenged her. She said, "I'm with him." Some little guy. "Nobody is with anybody," I replied, but we all kept walking until she moved on and became someone else's problem. A few minutes later I saw her all the way across the arena. About 40 rows up there was a little platform and a spotlight on her as she sang the national anthem. I had tried to throw Mahalia Jackson out of the convention.

One afternoon a lady kind of stumbled up to me in the hallway. As I tried to steady her, she said, "They are killing kids in Grant Park." I didn't know it was that bad. It wasn't but, in the arena, we knew nothing of what was actually going on in Grant Park. Years later I spoke to a cop who had been there. He said, "They dropped us off in the morning and we had no idea of what was going on anywhere else in the city."

Mayor Daley was loudly accused of losing control. In the late afternoon, a section of spectator seating filled with busloads of constituents. I wondered why for about an hour. When Mayor Daley came in, they erupted with applause and cheers. He was being dissed for the brutality of the Chicago police. Andrew Young made a motion to move the remainder of the convention to "a city that could keep control." Hizzoner stood, yelling and pounding from the floor accompanied by a noisy and supportive chorus from the seats near me. The convention will not be moved, and he will not take blame for slackers. They all left as soon as he sat down.

The delegates were animated with the old-time posters and parading for their candidate. I saw Walter Cronkite on the floor. I heard the speeches, but the outcome was no mystery, and the candidate was not exciting. I hoped LBJ would come, but he declined. Why show up at a chaotic convention that chose a man he did not even like. Besides, LBJ had the mark of a loser after his great start following the death of JFK in Dallas and taking the oath of office in AF-1 with Jacqueline Kennedy in bloody pink standing next to him.

My idealism and hope of fine tuning the economy to make America a better and more just society turned sour. Politicians fell from the ideals of the founders to the sad, the tragic and the petty. Sound familiar? I turned my hope to the great good news, great commission, and great hope of the resurrected Jesus Christ.