A Brief History of Student Activism

Abbie Hoffman

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Abbie's Speech

A few weeks ago I had a speaking engagement over at the University of Pennsylvania, and afterwards we went out to the local pub. There was a foreign exchange student there and he said to me, "Things seem so different here than where I come from. In my country, everything that's extracurricular is political, so if you want to protest Star Wars you go to the Science Club. But in the U.S. everything that's extracurricular seems either apolitical or anti-political." It turns out he had wanted to protest Star Wars at the University of Pennsylvania, so of course he went to the Science Club. The first week they had him selling brownies door-to-door, and the second week they had him competing in a contest to see who could make the best model airplane out of paper. He was beginning to get confused about student activism in America. When I asked him what country he was from, he said El Salvador. Even in a repressive country like El Salvador, where student leaders are hung from the gates of the Universities regularly, they have a concept of the engaged student. This is true around the world. But in the U.S., we do not have that concept.

The center of the student movement today is Seoul, Korea, where they are challenging the fundamental basis of their government. In France last December 500,000 students took to the streets to protest a government plan that would have limited higher education to rich and upper middleclass people. That protest forced the government to change their policy. The same thing happened in Spain, with students in the frontlines. If the corrupt oligarchy in Mexico falls, it will be the students in the streets leading the struggle. Whether you are looking at social movements in the Philippines or South Africa, the vast majority of the people in front are young people, because young people do make social revolutions. Revolution just isn't an idea that comes to you when you're middle-aged. Here in the United States, despite what happened in the sixties, student activism is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms, and a strange one at that (just like the working press or military intelligence). If you look at the life of the American campus through its history, the norm is what we've witnessed during the last 15 years. In American society, the university is traditionally considered to be a psychosocial moratorium, an ivory tower where you withdraw from the problems of society and the world around you to work on important things like your career and your marriage.

Activist movements are out there taking shape. All over the United States, in God's country, where God is white, male, 78 and Republican, there are grassroots organizations forming and fighting to save the environment. These movements are far from dead. One group that I've worked for has fought for 16 years to save the Delaware River and beat the Philadelphia Electric Company. In the process we've kicked out six politicians and fought hundreds of court battles involving civil disobedience. But when I look around at the people active in this movement, they're my age. There's a dearth of young people.

The same is true for urban politics. In 1966 a friend of mine, Jessie Gray, a tenant organizer, started the first rent strikes against landlords in New York City. It was an illegal thing to do; he was thrown in jail. All the tenant rent strike organizers that used this technique were thrown in jail. Today, not only are rent strikes legal, they are used by over 5,000 tenant organizations that are fighting landlords. So many of the people who began waging these battles nationally—Jesse Jackson, Gloria Steinem, Ralph Nader, the Berrigans, Dave Dellinger, myself, the student leaders Mario Savio and Mark Rudd—all are still very, very active today. But when you think about it, the only national figure under 30 that we know about is my fellow codefendant, Amy Carter. I mean there's no one else right, left, or center that you can name who's under 30.

But before you get to feeling too bleak about where we stand now, I want you to remember that those very moments when the empire mentality, as represented by the likes of Bork, Ollie, Reagan, Falwell,

and Company, seems to have everything under control, are exactly when the natives in the colonies—like the Philippines, South Korea and Latin America—grow rebellious, and the young at home get itchy. This is already happening. The lull in student activism ended about three years ago.

CNN took a poll of your age group. When asked to pick any period in history in any country in the world, overwhelmingly the 1960's in America was the choice. And you are right. That was an incredible period for many reasons. Demographics were on our side; there were a lot of us; with more of us to count, we counted more. The economy was on our side; this country was affluent, which facilitated dropping out—to go to Tibet or into the streets or to jail. There was a cultural revolution where the best and the popular were identical. And that is a very rare occurrence in history. Musical groups like the Beatles made music they'll still be listening to 200 years from now. The effect of something like the Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club album on me and other activists, organizers and counterculture people around the world was one of incredible impact—like starting a fire in a fireworks factory. Woodstock, which may have been the cultural event of the century, had the impact of a cultural revolution and it's going to be hard to duplicate that. With young people's attitudes today, if there's not going to be any sex, not going to be any drugs, I've got to tell you the rock and roll's going to have to be awful fucking good. How quickly paradise goes in your generation. It took a lot longer in our period to destroy concepts of Paradise.

To understand the sixties, you've got to be familiar with the fifties. There was an old popular Republican President in office whom we all loved, who stumbled through press conferences mixing up the names of countries, who believed we had a God-given duty to police the world and dismantle the welfare state, who was above politics. There was a tremendous religious revival going on, and a lot of screaming about censoring books. Bookburning was big. There were always attacks on rock and roll on the basis that it made blacks lust for white women and white women give in too easily. The radio was segregated, with the AM band reserved for whites and the FM band for blacks—until we started listening to the naughty black music and it did everything the critics said it would.

There were no drugs in the fifties. More precisely, there were drugs; but you took them to stay up for exams or to crash, not to get high. No one got high. As for sex, we had heard rumors, but doing it wasn't actually invented until 1961, with the pill, in my home town of Worcester, Massachusetts. In the fifties we were told that sex made your brain fall out. We were actually the last generation to be told babies were brought by storks or found under the cabbage leaves in the garden or just plain "don't ask."

And then there was Communism. Although one survey shows that 80% of your generation thinks the Russians fought with the Japanese and the Germans in World War II, the Russians were actually our ally in that war. In the fifties, an incredible anti-Communist hysteria took hold pointing to Communists in all the universities, in the defense plants, on the football teams. We had to go on this Red-Menace witch-hunt to get rid of Communists.

They didn't have urine tests then, or they would have used them. There always seem to be tests around to prove that you are a good, productive American. Generally, they're about as accurate as the test in Salem for witches which was to stick you in the water until you drowned, which meant you weren't a witch after all. If you were still breathing when you came up, then you were a witch and they took you out of the water and burned you. In the fifties it was the Loyalty Oath. You had to say, "I'm a good American and I promise I'll never overthrow the Government through violent means. I am not a Communist and I don't know anyone who is a Communist." Now with the American education I had, how am I going to know who's a Communist? The only textbook that mentioned it had two lines on Marxism and 27 pages about why it was all wrong. And in the fifties we had spies. We were catching them left and right, giving away secrets. Sometimes they would go on television, confess and say "I was wrong, but give me another break; I'll be straight, red-white-and-blue American and I'll catch the ball every single time." It took about eight years before Americans started saying, there is a moral position here, there is something called free speech, First Amendment rights and a right to privacy. There is a constitutional basis for saying that your political affiliations are your own business. In the end, the House UnAmerican Activities Committee could not withstand the clamor of those voices.

Now, while all this is going on in the homefront, the CIA was busy crushing any liberation movement abroad. What was interesting about the CIA of the fifties, of course, was that it didn't exist. No one knew about the CIA. Seventy-five percent of the Congress didn't know it existed, 95% of the American public didn't know it existed. The only spies were Russian spies. We didn't spy because we were nice people—So Ike said, and Ike wouldn't lie. Then, in May, 1960, a plane was shot down over Russia. Ike went on t.v. and said, "It's a weather reconnaissance flight." But, Khrushchev, who was the Gorbachev of his time, the reformer, had the pilot by the back of his shirt. Francis Gary Powers was his name, and he had a story to tell. He worked for the CIA, which at first we all thought meant the Culinary Institute of America. Spies? What I really remember was that they showed his survival kit, so called, which had a hypodermic needle filled with cyanide. If he ever got into an embarrassing situation he was supposed to do the honorable thing. In reality, he had second thoughts about that, which was how the United States citizens came to know what the rest of the world knew too damn painfully well, which was that we had an incredible apparatus called the CIA.

The fifties was an era of tremendous conformity. People thought of little beyond material success. The stereotype was the status-seeker—we didn't have the word Yuppie yet—who lived in Connecticut, dressed in a certain way and had something of the shopping mall mentality. These were days of arrogant flag-waving and smug complacency. We were number one in everything in the world, which gave us license to ignore much of what was actually going on internationally. And just about everyone bought this whole vision of America as an empire, which is sort of the shopping mall vision on a global scale. However, a few ungrateful brats, mostly young people like myself, questioned this vision, saw it as spiritually unrewarding, unjust for those who couldn't participate in it, and, frankly, a little boring. And so a resistance began to that frame of mind and it was out of that resistance to what we called prime-time culture, that the most activist decade in this century, the 1960's, happened.

Now the two social movements that really marked the period were Vietnam and the movement against apartheid. Of course, we don't use that word, but that is the Afrikaans word for segregation. And it was the movement against apartheid that really made the political break with the empire mentality of the fifties. Apartheid existed in the South of our country for almost 300 years, except for a few short years of Reconstruction. And those of us in the North didn't know it. Nothing in our schools, churches, classrooms, newspapers gave us any indication that it existed. We didn't know that there were lynchings going on all over the place. We didn't know that Black people couldn't vote in Mississippi. I mean, we didn't even know that there had been a Depression in the United States. I didn't find that out until I was about 28. And I didn't find out about the Rosenbergs until six years after they were executed. I wasn't taught it. There was a whole history of repression and the resistance to oppression which was just swept out. So South Carolina in 1963 or 1964 was as far away for me in New England as South Africa is for you today. We were moved first by what we saw on t.v., in the same way that you are moved by what you see on South Africa. Your generation is moved. We are a global community. They sing "We Are the World," you sing "We Are the World," they sang "We Shall Overcome," we sang "We Shall Overcome." We knew that segregation's time to fall had come. And the attitude of Washington in the early sixties towards segregation in the South can properly be called constructive engagement. I remember being beaten by the Klan in Macona, Mississippi, and the FBI was saying "Do you feel your civil rights have been violated?" I didn't know that the FBI was taking down my name, not the Klan's names. I can read about it now, among the 66,000 pages of government files I have.

Martin Luther King, who is now eulogized by people like George Bush as they sing "We Shall Overcome," was a very different man from the one they've conjured up. If you ask young people how he made a change, it seems that he prayed a lot. Martin Luther King was an outlaw. He went to jail again and again; he was beaten and reviled. The head of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, attacked him as a puppet of Communism and called him "the most dangerous man in America." The Justice Department infiltrated his organization, illegally wiretapped his phones, systematically harassed and threatened him. That's how much they loved Martin Luther King. This is the real history.

If you look at the beautiful, grainy, black and white footage of 'Eyes on the Prize' you see King and the other ministers in the front lines. Then you look at the long lines of marchers, at the people in the streets being beaten. Ninety percent of those people were your age, because it was young people that made and built the civil rights movement in the 1960's. People from SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SSOC, the Southern Student Organizing Committee. The southern civil rights movement was more than just a social upheaval, a social revolution. It was also where we went to school. We learned things that we didn't learn in the university. First we learned that it was okay to be emotional, that when we see social injustice, the right response is moral outrage. That doesn't just mean anger. Moral outrage is an emotional response that is proper in the face of "Colored Only" signs, or of a society that won't let people vote because of the color of their skins, or demands that the blacks sit in the back and the whites in the front of the car or the bus. If you were driving down, with blacks and whites together, you'd stop the car and the blacks got in the back seat. This is not the Peloponnesian War I'm talking about. This is 20 years ago. We learned moral outrage. We learned a different concept of authority. We learned how to question, disobey and defy authority. To do this we had to overcome our education which had taught us, "obey authorities," "they know more than you," "they're experts," "these things have been going on for a long time you know," "things don't change overnight," "there are many sides to every issue," and a million other such sayings that are like nails in a coffin. This is the traditional academic approach; nine out of ten academic conferences end with a question mark. When the final word is that there are many sides to every issue, each one as valid as the next, then you don't have to do anything about it—paralysis. We made the question mark an exclamation point and said "Now!" In that way we learned how to question and ultimately how to defy authority.

We also learned how to organize. You don't learn community organizing in the universities. You learn the skills of motivation. People come to you and say "this is the most apathetic school in the country." They say this at every institution, and have been saying it for 27 years. "Nothing ever changes," "city hall always wins." Consider that this is probably the most anti-democratic attitude that you could have. It means there's no need for them to have policemen standing behind you with guns. If you believe it, you live in a police state. It doesn't matter whether you're in Russia, El Salvador, South Africa or the United States. If you've internalized the idea that people, once organized, still cannot fight and beat the powers that be, then you've already lost.

We learnt some basic skills, which in some ways is the hardest part, because the problem of mechanics is the same for an activist as for someone in business. In business the people don't say "Look at the local office, they can't get their shit together, the mimeograph machine doesn't work, no one cares about anything," what you hear too often from progressive groups. They say, "We can do it, we'll sell it all." The difference is, in business the idea is that you're to use this for yourself, your career. There's no 'we' out there, the world is a jungle. You stay indoors or you become Ted Turner. That's the mentality of the business world. The strong eat the weak, and the weak are losers anyway. They're the ones that care about other things: the handicapped, radiation, tropical rainforests, poor Nicaraguans getting slaughtered. They're losers because it's 'I' that's strong. That's why we are the least unionized country in the world. Everyone has this idea that if you have to act collectively, with a sense of community, somehow you are a loser as an individual. Where the skills are, the motivation to bring people together, to organize, is lacking. You have to change that. Learn the skills any way you can, but use them to your own ends, which are those of social justice.

A woman interviewing me today asked, "Are you here to make trouble?" "I sure as hell hope so," I said. Then she asked me, "Are you a radical?" I said, "What's a radical?" She thought about it for a minute and then she came out with, "Well, someone that gets arrested." So I said, "There are a hundred thousand people in jail, you mean they're all radicals?" Now here we were, and we're both Americans right, that's the funny thing. But she's of the school that figures this country just happened, just sprang out of God's forehead right after they dumped the tea in Boston Harbor. But no, that's not exactly how it happened. They went out and actually shot cops and everything. We have to remember that. This country came into existence through Revolution. The status quo sits on society like fat on cold chicken

soup and it's quite content to be what it is. Unless someone comes along to stir things up there just won't be change. You need people that are going to take risks. Many took risks with their lives, some gave their lives. That's what it took and Jim Crow law ended. Legal segregation, apartheid, ended. I'm not saying racism ended in this country, not by a long shot. In fact, racial terrorism, with incidents like the ones in Cummings, Georgia, or Howard Beach, New York, may be on the rise, and the economic gap has widened between blacks and whites. It has been interesting to see that the issue that has galvanized students during the last three years was not one of self-interest but a moral issue. The students picked apartheid in South Africa. Eight thousand students have been arrested over this issue on campuses in the last three years. They've built shantytowns. Student leaders have gotten kicked out of schools. Over 160 universities have now joined the divestment movement, pulling out over 6 billion dollars. There's only about 60 corporations left down there.

Thinking about all this last summer, I flashed back to 196S. After the civil rights voting act was passed and the movement shifted to economic issues or to the racism and de facto segregation that existed in the North, the battles weren't won. King didn't win any battles after 1965. Whether in Chicago or in Memphis, Tennessee, a union battle or the poor people's march on Washington, economic battles were lost. Movements built around an issue have a time limit. Whether you win or lose, at some point the issue starts going away and you start to lose your momentum.

But there we were, full of piss and vinegar, ready to go, with all the skills we'd developed, ready to fight authority and knowing how to organize. We looked around and we saw Vietnam. Hot damn, Vietnam in 1965. Now, Vietnam was the longest war in U.S. history. There were two Vietnam wars: 1955 to 1965, and 1965 to 1975. The ones all the movies are about were the second half of the war. The first half is very important to analyze; it was the CIA's war. They were buying Indian tribes, like the Montagnards, building a corrupt government, inventing border incidents left and right, secretly smuggling hundreds of millions of dollars and heroin which ended up in the United States. Ollie and friends, in the Phoenix project in 1963, killed 40,000 people including the president of the country, Diem, whom we had installed. They didn't just kill Commies, they killed Buddhist leaders, anyone who didn't toe the line. We had hired a mercenary army. Then in 1964 they told a grand lie. Lyndon Johnson, who went on t.v. regularly saying, "1 will never send American boys to go and die in the Asian war" came on one night and told us that North Vietnamese P.T. boats had just attacked our Navy fleet in international waters in the Gulf of Tonkin.

The Senate debated for two hours. The vote was 98 to 2—Senators Morse of Oregon and Gruening of Alaska, and they aren't building statues for those two. That's when the second part began. Before it was over, we sent three and a half million soldiers over, and spent a trillion and a half dollars in that war. We used every weapon short of nuclear warheads. We had electronic battlefields and computerized electronic sensors that would locate anything alive. Then a fleet of helicopters would be sent out with napalm bombs, bombs that exploded 600 feet above land and cluster bombs with needles that would blanket a square half-mile, killing everything alive. Puff-the-Magic-Dragon, AC-47 gunships would hover over a village shooting tracer bullets all night long. The bullets were heat-seeking, killing water buffalos, gorillas, rebels, women, children. We killed two million people over there. Fifty-eight thousand Americans died, three hundred thousand were injured. Maybe another three hundred thousand suffered the effects of toxic poisoning from herbicides like Agent Orange. Between 1966 and 1969 there were months when over a trillion bullets were fired. This is the first war in history where the word trillion comes up.

In 1975, before the Frank Church Committee in the Senate, representatives of the CIA got up and said that the Gulf of Tonkin incident had been entirely made up in Langley, Virginia. Along with scores and scores of other incidents, the attack simply hadn't happened. But it was a little late in the day to be telling either the Vietnamese people, the American Congress or the American public. In point of fact, Vietnam was not a winnable war. It was illegal because Congress never declared war. It was immoral, unnecessary and unwinnable, because most of the people there believed in the revolution, in Ho Chi Minh. They believed the United States when it had said "We'll give you your freedom," believed the French, the Chinese. They were fighting for self-determination, victory or death. We could never have

won that war in Southeast Asia, 10,000 miles away from home, but not for lack of trying. We dropped more bombs on that country than ten times the number both sides used in World War Two. That's how little we tried to win the war.

At home, there was a virtual civil war. There was mutiny in the army, there were 20,000 people that went to Canada, and 5,000 that went to jail. Another 10,000 went underground, and another 5,000 went to Sweden. Hundreds of thousands took to the streets in protest. This meant that in every city and in every town, families were split apart over the war in Vietnam. There was a civil war that divided the generations, taking its firepower from the real war halfway across the world. We knew we couldn't get Archie Bunker, but maybe Edith and the kids we were going for all the way. Students were killed, and not just at Kent State and Jackson State. It's not easy to fight your government in times of war. Right up until the time when the bodies start coming back wrapped in plastic, people generally seem to like wars, and to not like those who won't sing the fight songs and wave the flag. Never in the history of Western civilization has a people risen up so successfully against its government in a time of foreign war as during the Vietnam War. The government used every trick in the book to get us, including blackmail, the IRS, and, in my case, incessant harassment from eight different government agencies. There were 155 illegal wiretaps on phones I used. My father's customers were driven out of his business. I was beaten by agents, as were people who associated with me. On one of the Watergate tapes you can hear Richard Nixon, Haldeman, and Ehrlichman discussing getting Abbie the Jew and the other Chicago Seven defendants, smashing them. There are photographs of me with the free nose job they gave me. We were not intimidated. In the end the troops came home.

We never felt we were unpatriotic. To me the country is the land and the people, not necessarily the guy who happens to be president. The Constitution is not the Bible. After all, it allowed slavery for 75 years, and denied the right of women to vote for well over a hundred years. The Constitution was based on the old English law that a man's home is his castle. It was designed essentially to protect individuals from government intrusion. That is a good deal for men who own castles. What's good about the Constitution is that it is a living document. The ways in which you can change it, where you can right the wrongs, are built in. So it's not a question of "My country right or wrong," but of righting the wrongs of my country. That's the way it's supposed to be, that's the way I read the Constitution. There is no point in having free speech unless you make use of it. The ratio of people who do is one in 10,000. The 10,000 people believe in the democracy they live in, but actually doing it, making change, is something else altogether, and in those years we crossed that line.

Just as there are parallels between the civil rights movement in the South in this country in the early sixties and your feelings about South Africa, there are parallels between Vietnam in the late sixties and Central America today. It's very clear to see. With the success of the divestment movement it became inevitable that the anti-apartheid movement was going to have the same kind of slack as the Civil Rights Movement did in the sixties, and that another movement was going to start to grow. And that was going to be resistance to the present war in Central America. Without the draft, resistance on college campuses would concentrate on CIA recruiting. So we started to organize on campuses against CIA recruiting. People say this is a free speech issue—they have a right to come on campus and speak. Well, that's true. You can invite any CIA head to come and speak; I'd gladly debate him any old time. This is free speech, as is what we're doing now. Free speech is not taking a person behind closed doors and saying, "You can't ask any questions about covert action policy." Free speech might be asking, "Am I going to be asked to assassinate a leader, or poison a well, or put mines in a harbor?" But if you ask those questions, they don't want you. You're not allowed to ask how much money there is, or what the budget is, or what the objective is. You get a very one-sided view. Recruiting is a privilege that universities grant corporations because they believe they have shared economic interests, which is a very different idea than that of higher learning. But there are other universities in this country that do not allow Exxon or Ford or any other companies to come on and recruit, because they have a different concept of what the role and responsibilities of the university should be. Certainly, free speech is not a license to lie, which is what the CIA does. One of my next activist acts is to take on the U.S. Army

ads on television because I think they're a fraud. I don't believe that you learn how to become a brain surgeon or a super-specialized electronics whiz in the Army. I don't believe you're in your parachute one minute and studying at the university the next. I don't believe the army is going to give you a fresh start. You learn how to clean toilets and kill people. That's not a beginning, that's a dead end. And it's not what they show you on t.v. So I'm going to sue them . . . when I can get the money together, (/n *response to heckling from the audience, Abbie takes off his shirt and puts on a 'JUST SAY NO' tee-shirt.')* There's trouble in Columbia, South Carolina tonight.

The notion that somehow a country of three million people, suffering from dire poverty and astronomical inflation, having just survived a devastating earthquake, and not ten years young after its own revolution, is a threat to the national security of the United States, well, it's absurd, but it's also awfully similar to what they were saying about Vietnam once upon a time. I've heard the contras compared with the French resistance. But then, having been down to Central America five times, I've also seen what they've done with my own eyes. I've seen victims of contra posses. I've talked to parents whose fourteen-year-old kid was skinned alive right in front of them. I was in a town when an ambulance was blown up by the contras, killing the driver, the nurse, the doctor and the patient. And now we've got Green Berets in Costa Rica training the police. U.S. helicopters are flying all over Honduras. Border incidents are being invented. We should not give aid to the contras, we should give aid to the Sandinistas, (/n *response to more heckling, Abbie pulls out another tee-shirt and offers it to the loudest heckler.')* Here's a tee-shirt. You interrupted me the best so you win the prize.

Meanwhile, around the corner, in the democracy of El Salvador, we are directing the largest air war in the history of the Western Hemisphere. It's not reported here, but it's going on. We blanket huge patches of the countryside with tracer bullets, fragmentation bombs, possibly napalm. A Harvard investigation team examined refugees and said "Napalm's being used down here," to which the Salvadoran Generals answer, "We do have napalm in our arsenals." The government lies when it says that El Salvador is a democracy and Nicaragua is a totalitarian dungeon. It's a lie. But it wins a war of attrition. Let's talk about how the Sandinista government treats the Indians. That's important. But talk about it in the context of Guatemala, where they have killed or driven from the country a million Indians in the last six years. We don't talk about Guatemala. Raise your hands if you can name the little newspaper that's always getting suppressed in Nicaragua. *La Prensa.* Okay, that is the most famous foreign newspaper in the United States. About eighteen people here got it. It has a circulation of 60,000 when it's running, which it will be soon. I've got a hundred dollars for someone who can name the opposition paper in El Salvador right now. If it's a democracy they ought to have an opposition paper, right? I mean they did have one called *La Cronica,* but the editor had his head cut off and the staff had its arms cut off. You see, *La Prensa* is what we would have had in World War II if we had had a newspaper called *Hitler Could Win.* How long would it have been in, say, 1942, before they would have burned it down? How many Tory newspapers did we burn during our own revolution? Those papers were burned to the ground. Tories were tarred and feathered. Fifteen percent of the country was put into exile. But this didn't happen in

Nicaragua. *La Prensa* is still around. Priests don't get murdered in Nicaragua, they do get murdered in El Salvador and Guatemala, daily.

Now Bob Dole said the other day that a three-day war would wipe out Nicaragua. Well, he's wrong. Unlike Grenada, the invasion of Nicaragua will take 500,000 troops to begin with, and then a long, long occupation— 10 to 15 years in all the mountains of Central America, maybe all the mountains of Latin America. We've invaded Nicaragua at least 11 times already, before the Sandinistas were even around. But we aren't given the history here in America. In Nicaragua they say, "You are taught to forget the history between our two countries, we are forced to remember it."

About three years ago something started to happen and I felt a familiar twinge. You began to see demonstrations on campuses across the country— against apartheid, against CIA recruiting, against sexual harassment. You had arguments between students and university administrations over control of campus newspapers, over tuition hikes, over having police and undercover agents on campus. What

I'm talking about, I think, I hope, is the resurgence of the student movement. There are about 50 or 60 different kinds of battles going on around the country. I've been to about six different regional student conferences and so far nothing has gelled nationally. That may or may not happen next February at the University of Rutgers, where they are holding the First Student National Convention. Like the early days of SDS, students will come from all over, and those who come will be activists. There are currently about 3,000; we need about 5,000. To have a real student movement the first condition is that you need about 5,000 people that see themselves as organizers first and students second, just as a union organizer sees him or herself as an organizer of workers first, and a worker second. Maybe there'll be 5,000 by February— talking about leadership, strategy, structures and decision-making, all towards building a national movement—and maybe there won't.

It's very strange for me to look at your generation. You see, we always had this idea that each generation was going to be brighter, that each generation was going to be more progressive, and would cheer more for justice and more for peace. But my youngest son, who's 16, says to me, "Dad, you're so quaint and romantic. You think things are going to get better, that there's hope," he says, "but none of us believe this." And then he tells me how half the world is going to be wiped out by AIDS, how the polar icecap is going to melt, that the tropical rainforest will be gone in thirty years and we won't have any oxygen, which doesn't matter anyway since the nuclear holocaust is going to happen within seven years, and if I'm a little doubtful about the dates, he says he can prove it to me on his computer. If you listen to the music today, it is true that what is inside it is not someone holding a flower, but instead the sense that things are really fucked up bad, big bad, a sense of hopelessness. And that's why the suicide rate among teenagers today is the highest since they've been recording teenage suicides. The problem isn't that these kids taking their own lives feel disconnected. They're very well connected to the idea that you can't do anything about your own situation, to the hopelessness, and the fatalism that's out there. I wrote an article about this and in my view, if the next generation is going to make some contribution it'll be the discovery of how you struggle for social change without having any hope. In the sixties, you see, when you jumped on the earth, the earth jumped back just like Einstein said it would. We knew we'd win every battle because every day we grew up. Every day was a new day and being on the brink of the Apocalypse was romantic. But maybe this vision that you have is the more realistic of the two, more into reality or "realty," as it's pronounced in North Carolina more than South.

You know how they always have these terms: the Lost Generation, the We Generation, the Me Generation, the I Generation. Well, today I feel sad because I look at your generation as possibly the last generation. I sense that this is what you really believe, so good luck. You see, I wouldn't know how to fight from that particular stance. But I'm affected by it, I'm learning by it. I hope you can learn to work with the tools you have, and what you believe is one of those tools.

We need young people at the front because young people make revolution. Every idea I had, every idea that every one of my gurus ever had, they had the idea when they were 17 years old and then just kept refining it. We didn't invent the cry of justice and peace in the 1960s and we certainly didn't write the final chapter. There's a lot of work to be done out there. I urge you, young people especially, take your personal computers, take your energy, your young legs, your eagerness, your natural feelings for justice and peace and a better deal for the planet and go out and make tomorrow better than it is today, better than we tried to make it yesterday. Thanks for bringing me back to Columbia, South Carolina.

Questions From The Audience

Question: I have a two part question. Do you believe that the Weather Underground movement of 20 years ago had a positive effect and do you believe that a similar group could effect a change in today's present police state.

Abbie: Resistance should seek the *most* common denominator and then push with the least amount of force needed to make the point. The questions that you are asking are about strategy. What kind of tactics you use to achieve social change depends on the historical moment and in particular on what the opposition is doing, because tactics are not developed in a vacuum. So, yes, up to 1968 at convention demonstrations where the cops just went in in waves, beating people up, where the city would not give you the right to protest, to even protest 10 miles away from where the convention was, where groups were being infiltrated by police agents, where all-out war was declared, clandestine operations were a necessity. There was an escalation which I feel was justified given the situation. The government's tactic was repression. If you were in El Salvador, for example, when they killed Archbishop Romero, if you were an organizer and believed in justice and peace and everything, you would have organized a demonstration, which people did. Then when 400,000 people came out into the square and the government came out with machine guns and shot at them, if you were a good organizer, you'd reconsider your tactics. You'd have to go back and say, "Well, I don't know for sure that I want to do that again and again." And after you thought about it some more, you might say, "You know, maybe I'll go up into the mountains, be a guerrilla." What choice would you have?

You see, it's not a question of charity. You have to go through changes yourself, as an individual. It's not a question of going out and making five million dollars and then sending a check to save the starving people in Mexico. Charity never produces change.

But those aren't the alternatives I see facing you today in this country. You have to have the courage to challenge power, to do so publicly, in the streets, both physically and in the streets in your mind. But you also have to learn to work within the system, so as to institutionalize the changes that are won in the streets. That means learning how the system works, learning how to communicate, how to use direct mail, how to use voter referendum drives, how to bring people together, how to forge small groups that make decisions. There is a science to organizing people and you stick to that science. You learn the art of communication, speaking American dialect, rendering unto Caesar's palace that which is Caesar's palace. You don't turn up your noses at entertainment because entertainment is way up there on the hierarchy of needs. If you learn all this stuff, you can be successful so you don't have to go underground. There were lots and lots of social changes that occurred in the sixties and they happened essentially through nonviolence.

Q: I was wondering if you had anything good or positive to say about the CIA?

Abbie: Yeah, they lost the trial in Northampton. *[Referring to the April 15, 1987 acquittal of 12 people, including Abbie Hoffman, of trespassing charges in connection with demonstrations against CIA recruitment at the University of Massachusetts.]* I believe that every country has a right to defend itself, has a right to national security. I believe that part of that national security implies gathering intelligence. What I question is the nature of the intelligence they're gathering and how they're gathering it. Looking through the whole history of the CIA, the covert action programs have done more harm to our national security than good. They've killed more allies than enemies. And secret organizations, of which the CIA is the most powerful in our government, are anti-democratic. An ex-agent, Ralph McGehee, described the prevalent attitude in the CIA towards Congress this way: "Treat 'em like mushrooms: keep 'em in

the dark, feed 'em a lot of manure." Now, this is just not the way the whole thing is supposed to work. I don't care how good Ollie North looks in his goddamn uniform, this is not how it works.

So, I would not want to abolish the CIA, but I would want to abolish the covert action programs, because they're buying the wrong intelligence. They ought to come back from Chile or Korea saying, "There are a lot of people without civil rights." Instead they come back with the names of the union organizers and the student leaders which they give to the governments so they can go pick them off. That isn't what we want them to do.

Q: I hope to make a comment rather than ask a question. That comment is one that was made by the President of the United States in 1862, a Republican I might add, who said, "to sit by in silence when they should protest makes cowards of men." That was said by Abraham Lincoln and I think those words are timely for us today.

Abbie: Yeah, it's nice to recall that there was a good Republican president.

Q: You mentioned the pull of the mass media. Could you elaborate on how the media shapes the right-wing politics of this nation?

Abbie: I don't know if I can or not. But I do know what the media's purpose is. The Constitution gives you freedom of the press, it doesn't give you freedom of the media. The media's another thing. The idea that the media is there to educate us, or to inform us, is ridiculous because that's about tenth or eleventh on their list. The first purpose of the media is to sell us shit, things we don't need. One moment it'll be 'don't do drugs' and ten minutes later it's Miller time.

Secondly, the media is there to keep us very secure about being Americans, to remind us that we are number one in everything. So if I say to you that there are 47 countries in the world that have universal health care whereby all citizens, regardless of how much money they earn, are guaranteed proper medical care and the United States isn't one of them, you say to me that I'm speaking heresy because we're the best in everything. That's the job of the media, to keep us secure about being number one, and insecure about losing everything we have. I could show you lots of things about the disparity in wealth and land ownership in this country that would show you that we're no different than Venezuela, that in America one percent of the population owns about 75 percent of the acquired wealth, and ten percent owns about 90 percent, while the rest of us, the other 90 percent, own next to nothing. But that perception is not tolerated in the media. You will never see it played on the networks.

Sex and violence are important to the media, and then way down there on the list falls information exchange. But it's a specific kind of information, what I call the dumbing of America. Vanna White is important but Daniel Ortega isn't. And it's important to know the difference between Ralph Lauren and Pierre Cardin, because if you want to dress for success you've got to know that. History is more or less irrelevant, the future is important. So it's a weird kind of education. You see, my idea of education is like Socrates', that it's a subversive act. You learn how to challenge the ideas that are out there. In the end, you'll never get the true story from the media because what the media controls and disseminates is mythology. In the movie *The Big Fix,* my friends looked for me as a fugitive making $3.50 an hour, which is what I was when I was underground. They found me as a cynical million dollar ad executive living in Beverly Hills, which is about as near to the truth as Hollywood could get.

Q: Is student apathy more prevalent in the eighties as compared to the sixties because we have no widely known figure we can look up to, whereas in the sixties students had leaders they respected.

Abbie: Sort of. No, actually, in the sixties, rather than role models what we had was a greater sense that we were making it up as we went along. We all had that sense. As for leaders, no we were very anti-leader. There's nothing worse in a progressive movement than being a leader because you're immediately getting trashed, burned out, knocked down all over the place. It's actually a really weird job. Sure we had role models, people like Saul Alinsky, King who had also been active in the fifties, as had Dorothy Day. I don't know if you know these names. But there weren't very many of them because the previous wave of activism had happened in the 1930's. It had been based on class and

union organizing, but between World War II and the witch-hunts of the fifties, we'd lost a lot of those people.

Q: Seems like then there were more musicians that were wide-reaching than now, with songs like Madonna's "Material Girl."

Abbie: Gee, that's number one in Nicaragua. They love that song. What's the matter with Madonna? What're you talking about anyway? Geez. I don't know, when we would get arrested, along with what we were saying we needed some music and the music was there. You need a cultural revolution to parallel the political revolution. I believe that. Especially in a society that communicates in a post-literate manner like ours does, that's not interested in books. You need the music. When we were all arrested at the University of Massachusetts, it was the first time they had brought the police on in 17 years, with attack dogs, helmets and everything, because civil disobedience has become a very polite sport in the last four or five years. But here they were very seriously beating up people, breaking legs and everything. People were being carted off to jail, handcuffed for hours. I went on the darkened buses and I said, "You folks know any freedom songs or anything?" And they said, "Oh yeah." They knew every song from *Hair.* They start singing all these songs from *Hair.* And I'm saying, "What the hell are you singing? *Hair* was a Broadway show. It was a rip-off, a fake; they were wearing wigs." They're saying, "What're you talking about, Abbie, it's a movie, it's a good movie." I thought it was kind of sad, because you do have to have your own songs and this was something they didn't have.

Q: I have a comment, which is that I think it would help all the public servants overcome their fascination with nuclear weapons, if we stopped making them penis-shaped.

Abbie: I agree with you one hundred percent. I feel I understand someone like Ronnie Reagan because he is a fifties person, he's the fifties incarnated, and that was a very repressed time. In the early years, in 1980 and 1981, Reagan used to get frustrated at press conferences since he didn't know which capitals went with which Central American countries and so he'd just say "Down there, there's trouble *down there,"* referring to Central America. And I used to say, "My god, that's fifties talk." That's when my parents said: "Don't play with anything down there or you'll get in trouble." And then—hang on, this only gets better—then I looked at a map of the United States and there's Florida, so erect, so firm, jutting into the soft, compliant basin of the Carribean. That's what they mean about the Big Stick policy. That's it. So the psychosexual history of all this stuff is very important and you're right to be aware of it.

Q: Do you know that in Honduras the constitution states that there should be no foreign parties tolerated within the country's borders?

Abbie: They're violating their own Constitution, sure. Honduras is being Lebanonized right now. Most of our money that's sent down there as aid, Honduran generals fight duels over—who'll get a half a million or a million dollars to put in a Swiss bank account. That's where most of it goes, not to keep the contras in boots and blankets and things. They say the best-paying job in Nicaragua is in north Nicaragua, and it's the one the top contras have. They're big business, multi-millionaires, in a country that's per capita income is 684 dollars and sinking due to the concerted efforts of our government. In Nicaragua the damage is done. The vision the revolution had in the first couple of years, the achievements they made, are hard to live up to now, with the beating they've taken. So we have to face the irony that the U.S. is out to crush the joy as well as the concrete achievements of what I believe to be the most humanitarian of revolutions. We have come that far from our own originating impulses.

Abbie Hoffman
A Brief History of Student Activism
1987

The Best of Abbie Hoffman
Speech given at the University of South Carolina, September 16, 1987.

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