

# The Young Have to Be There

Abbie Hoffman

1986

The Left has a marvelous ability to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. The great contradiction of the 1960s was exactly how much we pulled off—how far we got with how few and how little knowledge.

In 1968, the pinnacle year of the '60s, a poll of students showed that the most popular Americans were Richard Nixon and John Wayne, in that order. We had the same percentage of business-administration majors and engineers that we have today. And when Kent State and Jackson State happened, 800 universities went out on strike, but there were 5,000 universities. To be effective, you have to realize that you work between the parameters of nobody and everybody. It's not "nobody" that cares. It's not "everybody" that agrees with you.

How many people do you need to make a change? I'm convinced that it's not a majority; it's never a moral majority that makes the change. The fact that 75 per cent of Americans are against contra aid is as irrelevant to me as

Reprinted from *Social Policy* magazine with permission. the fact that 75 per cent of Americans have wanted universal health care since 1947, and we don't have it.

So I want to emphasize what we pulled off in the 1960s, what I think we achieved.

First of all, we ended Jim Crow. We brought down legal segregation. Apartheid—let's call it what it was. It was apartheid that had existed for almost 200 years, give or take a few years during Reconstruction. That came to an end.

There was a student movement in this country. Students asked, "What is the role of the university in society? What is the role of the student in the university?" Out of that grew a movement. Today you look at that and say, "My God, it's hotbeds of social rest out there. Why trust anybody under thirty these days?" Campuses have traditionally been yuppie training camps and places where you go to work on your careers and your marriages—where young rich ladies and gentlemen went to become older rich ladies and gentlemen.

So all of a sudden there was a student movement, and tremendous individual and collective rights were won: the right to vote when you're eighteen; co-ed dorms; controversial speakers on campus; student control of the newspapers; ROTC out, CIA out. A student movement achieved great collective and individual rights that young people barely appreciate today.

We had a movement for freer lifestyles. Wearing your hair long might have seemed frivolous to some of the more straight people on the Left in the 1960s, but I tell you that was a full-time commitment because you were ostracized from your community. You were picked up by the cops. You could get your head shaved. You were kicked out of classes. It had meaning. Now kids can wear their hair long, short, red, blue, pink, shave it off, or whatever. You can wear a bra or not wear a bra, even if you're a guy, it's like okay. So these freer lifestyles were won because of what happened in the 1960s.

Then, of course, there was the war in Vietnam. In 1964, only 8 per cent of the American public opposed U.S. policy in Southeast Asia, and the war had been going for ten years. People ask me, "Do we have a Vietnam in Central America?" Of course we do. It's in its first ten years.

If you look at the history of Western civilization, foreign wars in particular have been extremely popular. You can't find another foreign war of aggression fought by such a powerful country where the people rose up and said, "Bring the troops home." But it did actually happen here. We would have troops in Nicaragua for sure tonight if it hadn't been for Vietnam. I think the greatest legacy of the 1960s was the general feeling that not only can you fight the powers that be, but you can win.

I've never liked guilt-tripping. I've always left the concept of sin to the Catholic Church. When I was four, my mother said, "There's millions of people starving in China. Eat your dinner." I said, "Ma, name one."

I started right off trying to resist guilt. I tried to give people a sense that it was in us to be altruistic, to be curious, to explore, to be creative, and that taking on the powers that be was the best game in town. It was fun to go out there and say, "The emperor's got no damn clothes on." It was fun to have that sense of engagement where you jumped on the earth and the earth jumped back—the sense that you were a part of history.

Can it happen again? No way. It is never going to happen again. The music is never going to be that good, the sex is never going to be that free, the dope is never going to be that cheap. Young people cared because there were just more young people to care. We're never going to have the affluence. Minimum wages were \$40 a week—that's what we got, and it wasn't so bad. You got Chinese food on Friday. You went out. The combination of affluence, demographics, the resistance to the 1950s that was there—all those elements are not going to happen again.

If it was up to the Left to make a revolution in America, we'd still be trying to figure out how three people can get out of a phone booth—two trying to figure out how they can leave the third one in the phone booth because that person is really a revisionist. In the '60s we went beyond the Left in our style, in our language. We were American in every sense of the word, especially in our excesses.

I speak on about sixty campuses a year, and I meet young activists out there. The leaves of apathy are stirring on the campuses. You cannot have social revolution, you cannot have change without the young. You simply can't do it. The young have to be there. They have to assume their place because the young have creativity, they have the energy, they have the impatience. That's what you need.

You have to say, "I don't want to hear about constructive engagement. I don't want to hear all the political considerations. I don't want to hear about the commies in the woods. I don't like what's going on in South Africa, and I want it done now. Freedom now." That's what it was in the 1960s. You need the youth to dissent.

Sure we were young. We were arrogant. We were ridiculous. There were excesses. We were brash. We were foolish. We had factional fights. But we were right.



Abbie Hoffman  
The Young Have to Be There  
1986

The Best of Abbie Hoffman  
Originally published in The Progressive Vol. 53 • June 1989 • No. 6.

[stealthiswiki.com](http://stealthiswiki.com)