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1968 Like a knife blade, the year severed past from future

By LANCE MORROW

In the early months of the year, rivers overflowed their banks. "A spirit of change and recklessness seemed to pervade the very inhabitants of the forest," a naturalist wrote afterward. Squirrels inexplicably marched southward in migration, tens of thousands at a time. They plunged heedlessly into the Ohio River and drowned. Earthquakes reversed the flow of the Mississippi so that its waters surged upstream at the speed of galloping horses. Whole forests fell down, like stacked fields of rifles toppling. A double-tailed comet appeared in the night sky over America.

All of that happened in the annus mirabilis of 1811, a year of wonders.

Twenty years ago, in 1968, America -- and much of the world as well -- felt the dislocations of another annus mirabilis.

Nineteen sixty-eight had the vibrations of earthquake about it. America shuddered. History cracked open: bats came flapping out, dark surprises. American culture and politics ventured into dangerous and experimental regions: uplands of new enlightenments, some people thought, and quagmires of the id. The year was pivotal and messy. It produced vivid theater. It reverberates still in the American mind.

Nineteen sixty-eight was tragedy and horrific entertainment: deaths of heroes, uprisings, suppressions, the end of dreams, blood in the streets of Chicago and Paris and Saigon, and at last, at Christmastime, man for the first time floating around the moon.

One is sometimes incredulous now at 1968, not only at the astonishing sequence of events but at the intensity, the energy in the air. People lived their lives, of course.

And yet the air of public life seemed to be on fire, and that public fire singed the private self. Revolutionary bombast gusted across the wake of elegy for something in America that had got lost, some sense of national innocence and virtue. More than in ordinary times, people thought about death, about spiritual fulfillment, and about transfiguration.

The nation pulsed with music and proclamation, with rages and moral pretensions. "This is the dawning of the age of Aquarius," sang the cast of Hair, which came to Broadway in April. Janis Joplin expressed one side of the year fairly well: ecstatic and self-destructive simultaneously, wailing to the edges of the universe, flirting with the abyss. Joplin, who died of a heroin overdose in 1970, memorably sang Me and Bobbie McGee, the 1969 Kris Kristofferson song that contained a perfect line of 1968 philosophy, "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose."

But driving across Indiana in early May 1968, searching for Bobby Kennedy's whistle-stop campaign, one heard another chord as well -- Paul Simon's wistful note of disconnection: "Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio? A nation turns its lonely eyes to you."

Rowan and Martin's TV Laugh-In domesticated chaos into snippets. It flashed absurdities, like vaudeville on amphetamines -- Goldie Hawn dancing in body paint, Tiny Tim tiptoeing through the tulips. Laugh-In gave the nation "You bet your sweet bippy!" and "Sock it to me!" a line that Republican Candidate Richard Nixon, among other celebrities, recited in three seconds of network time in September. (In deference to his dignity, Nixon was spared the customary dousing with a bucket of water.) The Rolling Stones snarled about the Street Fighting Man. Never before had an annus mirabilis transpired before the television cameras in Marshall McLuhan's global village: the drama played to a capacity house, the audience of mankind.

Those over the age of 30 carry much of 1968 in the memory, an indelible collage of photographs, television footage, private scenes of where-I-was- when-I-heard-the-news. A year as graphic as an afternoon dream:

-- During the Tet offensive in Saigon, the police chief's arm in profile that draws a straight line through his trigger finger and by the leap of the bullet into the fear-rigid Viet Cong's brain: a crisp extinction. The weird surprise of death, the pop into non-

being. In the TV version, the man falls like a short tree and his head pours neat but urgent blood upon the street, as from a vial.

-- Sad-jowled Lyndon Johnson at the end of March, peering out at America, through the close-up on a grainy black-and-white television screen: "Accordingly, I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your Presi . . ." The nation stunned, astonished, and millions of the young performing backflips.

-- A Memphis motel balcony, blacks standing over a fallen black man, their faces abruptly up and their fingers stabbing the air, indicting the air, along the line the shot had taken, as if the trajectory of their fingers' aim could bore back through the air to the assassin.

-- The dark smoke of riots hanging over the Washington skyline -- smoke giddy with looting and circus, but at last completely rational: a sort of clarity of bitterness.

-- The sudden sense of vacancy, of eternity, in Robert Kennedy's eyes as he lay on the floor of the Los Angeles hotel pantry. That vacancy, almost exactly halfway through the year, seemed to break the year's back. Nothing good, one thought, could happen after that.

-- Chicago policemen as big as beer trucks thundering through tear-gas- poisoned air and clubbing with nightsticks. The answering, taunting obscenities and rage, and after that the McLuhan-wise chorus from those being clubbed: "The whole world is watching!" Then, through the death stench of the Chicago stockyards, inside the Democratic Convention, Connecticut Senator Abraham Ribicoff on the podium denouncing the "gestapo tactics" of the police, and down on the floor, in the Illinois delegation, Mayor Richard Daley, face contorted, screaming at Ribicoff. TV's nation of lip-readers & thought they saw Daley emit the words: "F--- you, you Jew son of a bitch . . . Go home!" Daley later said he never used language like that. In any case, a century of backroom politics died at that instant.

On and on. Nineteen sixty-eight was a perverse genius of a year: a masterpiece of shatterings. The year had heroic historical size, and everything except Tiny Tim's falsetto seemed momentous. Temperaments grew addicted to apocalypse. The printer's ink from the papers that announced it all would smudge and smudge the fingers: history every day dirtied the hands.

Some of the events of the year -- the starvation in Biafra, for example, or the seizure of the American intelligence ship Pueblo -- might have occurred in some other year. The events were significant but not central to the drama. For the essential 1968 was mythic. It proceeded chaotically and yet finally had the coherence and force of tragedy. And if it was the end of some things (of the civil rights movement, of Lyndon Johnson's generous social vision, of the liberals' hope to keep government on its trajectory), it prepared the way for other beginnings: the women's movement, the environmental movement, the complex reverberant life that the '60s would have in the American mind long after the melodrama was over and those previously on fire went to tend their gardens.

Nineteen sixty-eight was a knife blade that severed past from future, Then from Now: the Then of triumphant postwar American power in the world, the Then of the nation's illusions of innocence and virtue, from the more complicated Now that began when the U.S. saw that it was losing a war it should not have been fighting in the first place, when the huge tribe of the young revolted against the nation's elders and authority, and when the nation finished killing its heroes. The old Then meant an American exceptionalism, the divine dispensation that the nation thought it enjoyed in the world. In 1968 the American exceptionalism perished, but it was reborn in a generational exceptionalism -- the divine dispensation thought to be granted to the children of the great baby boom. The young were special, even sacred, in the way that America once was special and sacred. American innocence and virtue found new forms, new skins.

The great size of the baby boom generation also encouraged a sort of subliminal illusion. When time flows from father to son, from past through present into future, the generations have their orderly procession, moving vertically through time. But it was a metaphysical conceit of the baby boomers that the present expanded horizontally, into a kind of earthly eternity. "We want the world, and we want it now!" In the great collision of the generations, the young created their own world, a "counter culture" as Historian Theodore Roszak first called it, and endowed it with the significances and pseudo profundities of a New World. No one had ever had sex before. No one had ever had the Dionysian music, the sacramental drugs, the world struggling back to its protomagical state.

In the extravagant, dangerous, ridiculous garden of the '60s, when the young were "forever young," as Bob Dylan's later anthem said, fierce and primal juices fired through the nerves. Complexity fell away. Deferrals of pleasure and deferences to age, the old Confucian virtues that had made their way into America through the Protestant ethic, blew away at the concussion of youth. "Don't trust anyone over 30" became the slogan of the conspiracy.

It was a moment, 1968, that mysteriously stepped outside of time, one that was forever bringing the young to dimensions of eternity and the sacred: the boy-soldiers in Viet Nam were connected to death, the heroes to their own cessations, cut down in the prime of their youth and work. Part of the power of the year derives from the mystery of all the possibilities that vanished into death and nothingness. (In October there came an odd, minor coda to the sex and death and disillusion of the '60s, when Jacqueline Kennedy married Aristotle Onassis. Illusion -- Camelot and the rest -- came to disillusion, a passage that was a major theme of 1968.)

Anthropologists speak of the origin myths of tribes. The children of the post-World War II baby boom, 76 million of them, were -- and in ways, still are -- an enormous tribe. The year 1968 represents the origin myth of that tribe.

The Tet Offensive

More than any other force, the war in Viet Nam alienated the American young from their elders -- and, in equally tragic ways, from one another. The war was the dark hallucination, the black magic that would come and take the young and bear them off to the other side of the world and destroy them, for reasons progressively more obscure. Lyndon Johnson had campaigned for the White House in 1964 by promising that "we are not about to send American boys 10,000 miles away to do what Asian boys ought to be doing for themselves," but he ! ended by treating the war as a crusade for freedom and squandering his presidency and his country on it.

By the beginning of 1968, almost 16,000 Americans had been killed in Viet Nam and more than 100,000 wounded. During that time the war in Viet Nam became a gathering presence in American life. History obeyed Newton's Third Law of Motion: for every U.S. action in Viet Nam, there came a (seemingly) equal and opposite reaction back home. America internalized the war, as if it had swallowed fire. In the fall of 1967, 35,000 demonstrators had marched on the Pentagon and in the hip-

mystic style had attempted with chants to levitate the palace of the war machine. Draft resistance had become a conspicuous form of American political theater. Young men burned their draft cards in front of news cameras, the flames licking around the edges of the cardboard in a poetic echo of the televised flame that licked from a Marine's Zippo lighter to torch a Vietnamese hut.

The '60s had their crisp, brutal simplicities, which coexisted in surreal stagecraft with hallucinations and mirages, masterpieces of illusion and self- delusion. Many of the young, for example, cherished (almost autoerotically) the illusion that they were part of "the Revolution," a force of history that would overthrow the power structure in the U.S. And illusion was an indispensable instrument of the war effort: the "body count," for example, or the "light at the end of the tunnel," the longed-for illumination, never seen, that would indicate that victory and salvation were near. At the close of 1967, the official invocation of the light at the end of the tunnel was still ritual. The New York Times, influenced by Government briefings, reported in late December that "military indicators in Viet Nam present the most dramatic and clear-cut evidence of progress in the war since the dark days of 1965."

Then, as often happened in Viet Nam, one murderous mirage overtook another. The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces launched their general offensive during the lunar New Year, called Tet. Militarily, Tet was a defeat for the Communists. But once again in Viet Nam and in the American mind, illusion triumphed over reality. America, and much of the rest of the world, regarded Tet as shocking proof that the war was a disaster for the U.S., unwinnable.

The first unhappy surprise for Americans came at dawn Viet Nam time on Jan. 30, 1968. Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces attacked Da Nang, the second largest city in South Viet Nam, and seven other major towns. Almost 24 hours later, they mounted a wave of near simultaneous attacks throughout South Viet Nam. They hit 36 of the country's 44 provincial capitals. They overran all but a corner of the historic former capital at Hue. Communists penetrated the heart of Saigon. They attacked the U.S. embassy, the presidential palace, the government radio station. All this was the work of an enemy that the Johnson Administration had reported to be "struggling to stave off military defeat."

The Communists had hoped to use their Tet offensive to provoke a general uprising in the countryside. In that, they failed. They also suffered disastrous casualties. Yet Tet was for them an enormous victory. It turned American opinion decisively against the war. "What the hell is going on?" Walter Cronkite demanded when he heard about the offensive. "I thought we were winning this war."

Tet broke whatever residual spell was left in America's old cold war calls to arms in the name of defending freedom around the globe. America's national morale curdled and began tumbling off into the unthinkable. The true unthinkable was that "Amerika," as those on the New Left dubbed it, was not merely mistaken or even bad, but evil. The mild unthinkable, entertained probably by most, was that the nation had made a bad mistake. Americans, who love a winner, detest thinking of themselves as losers, and they saw themselves distinctly as losers after Tet. Metaphysically, they may have thought that if America was a loser, God's grace had been withdrawn, or possibly was never there; the entire American idea turned into a fraud.

Viet Nam and Tet reverberate now in American foreign policy and in American psychology about the rest of the world. Ever since, any attempts to assert American force have twitched a neo-isolationist nerve. Only easy knockouts like Grenada seem tolerable, and then only if done so quickly that television has no time to bring the carnage into the house. But for the experience of Viet Nam, the U.S. might have invaded Nicaragua by now; the threat there is more immediate, the logistics easier. Instead, the battle is waged by proxy, sloppily and tentatively and erratically. "Involvement" and "commitment" have become dangerous words, alive with the demons of 1968.

More broadly, Viet Nam taught America something about its fallibility. The U.S. may have overlearned the lesson, but it is an instruction that at least < tends in the right direction. Fighting Viet Nam, the U.S. squandered resources it should have devoted to its real international struggles, against Japan, Germany and other economic competitors, against poverty and other problems at home. Those who took the nation into the fetid business of Viet Nam did not look at the real world and see the real dangers to America, the economic Pearl Harbors.

Martin Luther King Jr.

Leaders kept vanishing, leaving behind them a kind of iridescent afterimage upon the retina, and a sense of wonder.

Sudden, colossal vacancies: Lyndon Johnson capitulated and removed himself from the melodrama. The nation had barely absorbed that event when, five days later, Martin Luther King Jr. leaned over the second-floor balcony of the Lorraine Motel in a black neighborhood of Memphis and was hit in the neck by a rifle bullet. He was pronounced dead an hour later.

In the years since the December day in 1955 when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus to a white man, King's moral example and leadership had begun the transformation of the South, and of America, winning for blacks the human rights that even a Civil War a century earlier had not bestowed. The civil rights movement from Montgomery to Memphis was an American epic, with a thousand evocations of place and name: the lunch counters of Greensboro in 1960; the "Freedom Riders" of 1961; SNCC; CORE; the March on Washington; James Meredith; Medgar Evers; Bull Connor in Birmingham; Philadelphia, Miss.; Schwerner, Goodman and Chaney . . . But race and slavery, America's original sin, came back always, and had begun to break into sporadic warfare in the Northern ghettos.

Secretary of Education William Bennett was teaching political philosophy at the University of Southern Mississippi when King was killed, and he spent the rest of the year trying to help his students, and himself, understand what had happened. "I went back and back again to the Yeats poem (("The Second Coming," whose lines were quoted many times that year)). It said, 'Things fall apart: the center cannot hold./ Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world/ The blood-dimmed tide of innocence is loosed and everywhere/ The ceremony of innocence is drowned./ The best lack all conviction, while the worst/ are full of passionate intensity.' " Those lines might have been written as the epigraph for 1968.

After King died, Bennett was driving his 1950 Chevrolet from Mississippi to New Orleans. As he entered Louisiana, he was run off the road -- "something like Easy Rider" -- by two white men in a pickup truck. When Bennett got out, the men apologized, saying that since he was driving such an old car, they assumed he was a

"nigger." A few weeks later as he was driving the same Chevy with Mississippi license plates north to Harvard Law School, a group of college-age kids passed him on a Connecticut highway, threw a Coke bottle at his car, and yelled, "Go back to Mississippi, you damn redneck."

King's principles of Gandhian nonviolence had already begun losing their constituency among blacks by early 1968. Watts, Detroit, Newark and other cities had erupted in riots. As the atmosphere of violence and apocalypse deepened, King's moral style came to seem to many blacks to be irrelevantly noble, archaic, out of touch with the sharper realities. Nonviolence was perhaps a principle too spiritual and forbearing for the age. Blacks sometimes satirically referred to King as "de Lawd." The Nobel Peace Prize that he won in 1964 may have been an ultimate achievement in the international (white) world, but it subtly distanced him from American blacks.

In any case, a new generation of black leaders was feeling its power -- H. Rap Brown, Stokely Carmichael, for example, men with incendiary strategies. The Black Panthers had taken up the gun and within two days of King's death were shooting it out with police in Oakland. King was a genius of persuasion, of conscience and rhetoric. The preacher's moment seemed to have passed. King represented America's better self, but now it seemed that the deeper drive, the murderous urge, was taking over the soul. At the time of his death, King, short of money, beleaguered as always by the FBI, was trying to regain his traction as the pre-eminent American black leader.

His murder sent black America into paroxysms. James Baldwin said later that white Americans would never understand the depth of the grief that blacks felt at that moment. America was swept for a week by riots. Forty-six people died, all but five of them black. Washington, the city where King led his triumphant, nonviolent march in the summer of 1963, was overtaken by arson and looting. The rioting was almost as bad in Baltimore, Chicago and Kansas City. In all, there was violence in 125 cities. The authorities called out 20,000 regular Army troops and 34,000 National Guardsmen. On April 15 Chicago's Mayor Daley ordered his police to shoot to kill arsonists and to shoot to maim looters.

Todd Gitlin, a onetime activist in the leftist Students for a Democratic Society, writes in his superb new history, The Sixties, that "rage was becoming the common coin of

American culture." Two months before King's death, black students in Orangeburg, S.C., were demonstrating outside a bowling alley that would not permit them to enter. After several days the confrontation turned violent. Police fired on a group of students. Thirty-four were wounded, and three died.

King has his place in the American pantheon now, and a national holiday in his honor. One of his lieutenants, Jesse Jackson, who was at the Lorraine Motel that evening in Memphis, is now in the front rank of Democratic presidential candidates, a development inconceivable at the time of King's death.

But in the long recessional from the '60s, and especially during the Reagan years, the moral will to advance the cause of blacks through Government action has waned, a function of straitened budgets and a kind of cultural recoil from the principles of Johnson's Great Society. The black middle class has grown and in many ways prospered, and yet the black underclass has hardened into a cruel permanence. Says Charles Stith, pastor of Boston's Union United Methodist Church and a highly regarded black activist: "Martin Luther King fought for our rights to ride in the front of the bus. But folks still can't afford to ride the front of the airplane. This isn't a civil rights issue. We've dealt with that. The crisis now is economic."

The night that Martin Luther King died, Bobby Kennedy was in Indianapolis. He stood on a flatbed truck in a parking lot and addressed an angry, grieving crowd of blacks. "Those of you who are black can be filled with hatred, with bitterness and a desire for revenge," he said. "We can move toward further polarization. Or we can make an effort, as Dr. King did, to understand, to reconcile ourselves and to love."

What died with Martin Luther King Jr. and later, in great finality, with Robert Kennedy, was a moral trajectory, a style of aspiration. King embodied a nobility and hope that all but vanished. With King and Kennedy, a species of idealism died -- the idealism that hoped to put America back together again, to reconcile it to itself. In the nervous breakdown of 1968, the word idealism became almost a term of derogation. Idealism eventually tribalized into aggressive special interests ("environmentalists, feminists and radical gays," et al.), doing battle in a long war of constituencies. Georgia Congressman John Lewis, a veteran of the long civil rights movement, says now that the '60s put the nation on a "freedom high." But after King's death, Lewis observes, "people just dropped out. It had an effect on the

American psyche. I think some people were afraid to hope again, afraid to get involved."

The Students Rise

Abbie Hoffman, founding father of the Yippies and still, at 51, a social activist, has an arresting theory about time and the stages of human development. "The world really began for us," his idea goes, "on Aug. 6, 1945, when the atom bomb was dropped. So that during the '60s we were all young. The whole world was going through its youth, its atomic youth. If you looked at the magazines at the time, they were all youth oriented, and the culture was all youth oriented." Today, says Hoffman, it is not only that the baby boomers are getting middle-aged. The entire society, he thinks, is in its atomic middle age -- even the young today are middle-aged. The theory has a limited, even narcissistic logic and a certain charm.

In 1968, by the Hoffman hypothesis of atomic aging, the world was about 22 years old. The baby-boom generation, not only in America but in much of the rest of the world, grew up not merely in the shadow of the Bomb but also in an envelope of common experiences. Television gave them a collective memory -- of Howdy Doody and Beaver Cleaver, of public events (most vividly and traumatically, the assassination of President John Kennedy). Then, in the mid- and later '60s, the young endlessly enriched and elaborated their culture, through music mainly and through drugs and costume and linguistic style (groovy, far-out, rip-off, bummer, bread, acid head, pigs, narcs, rap, trash). They made a worldwide cultural revolution.

Woodstock and the "Woodstock Nation" that Hoffman wrote about would come in 1969. The year 1968 was more politically preoccupied. But the personalities and anthems of rock gave pulse to the politics and identity to the young. It was the sound that they inhabited -- Steppenwolf, Country Joe and the Fish, the Jefferson Airplane, the Grateful Dead, Marvin Gaye, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Simon and Garfunkel, the Beatles going into their White Album phase and, above all, Bob Dylan, still. Dylan's music had a genius of portent: "The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind." Back in 1965 he had written, "Something is happening here, but you don't know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones?" He was right.

The youth of the world's atomic age came to a sort of critical mass in the spring of 1968. Nineteen days after King's assassination, students at Columbia University

began occupying five buildings on the campus and held them for almost a week. Mark Rudd, a Columbia junior with a gift for confrontational theater, led an "action faction" of S.D.S. He wrote an open letter to University President Grayson Kirk, which he closed with a line from LeRoi Jones: "Up against the wall, m, this is a stickup." With some of the student movement's talent for converting disrespect to symbolic desecration, the occupation forces moved into Kirk's office, smoked his cigars (one student with his feet perched on Kirk's desk, an act of smirking and virtually Oedipal lese majeste -- O.K., Dad, whatcha gonna do about it, huh?) and, after six days of occupation, left the place a mess.

The uprising at Columbia was the work of a minority of student radicals. But it was not an aberration. Around the world that year in cities as widely spaced as Paris and Tokyo and Mexico City and Berkeley, students rose in protest and revolt. The spasms of unrest seemed almost psychologically coordinated, as if a mysterious common impulse had swept through the nervous system of a global generation. The theme of the protests, and of the generation, was . . . what? To challenge authority. To change the world. To take possession of the world. To announce itself.

In Paris, what began as protest over sex-segregated dormitories ended in a general strike and very nearly brought down the government of Charles de Gaulle. Hallucination again, the decade's leitmotiv of illusion: now you see it, now you don't. For some days it looked as if France were in the grip of a revolution, everyone manning the barricades. The country came to a boil and then, just as quickly, cooled down to the status quo.

If there seemed an ultimate unseriousness about Paris in May, the events in Mexico City some months later were a trauma and tragedy. Mexico, under President Gustavo Diaz Ordaz, was preparing to play host to the Olympics. But the mood of students, intellectuals and much of the middle class had soured on the Diaz government's authoritarianism. On Oct. 2 some 10,000 people gathered at Tlatelolco Square. Late in the afternoon, hundreds of soldiers hidden in , the Aztec ruins opened fire, while secret-police agents in the crowd drew pistols and began making arrests. That night army vehicles carried the bodies away. No one knows how many died. Some estimate 300; others say 500. The government admitted to only 32.

The massacre achieved its immediate objective: the protest movement disintegrated. On Oct. 12 the Olympic flame was lighted, and white doves were released above Aztec Stadium to start the Games.

An End of Heroes

Robert Kennedy had come into the presidential race in a sheepish and vaguely ignominious fashion, piggybacking on Eugene McCarthy's courage. McCarthy, the sardonic Minnesota Senator who wrote poetry and loved to work the contrarian vein, challenged L.B.J. as far back as November 1967. The McCarthy campaign, which seemed a quixotic gesture, swiftly picked up thousands of young volunteers. Long-haired students went to the barber and put on neckties ("Clean for Gene") and fanned out across New Hampshire, the first primary state, canvassing door to door, building a grass-roots movement.

Robert Kennedy had contemplated challenging Johnson, but decided against it. His best year, advisers told him, would be 1972, after Johnson finished a second term. Kennedy promised McCarthy that he would stay out of the race. But then McCarthy astonished everyone, and seemed a winner, by getting 42% of the Democratic vote in New Hampshire (another example of perceptions being more powerful than realities, since the sitting President actually won, with more than 49%). Kennedy saw the world in a new way. Obviously, 1968 was going to be an unusual year. Somewhat maladroitly, on March 16, four days after New Hampshire, he plunged in.

He overtook McCarthy in primaries in Indiana and Nebraska, then lost to him in an upset in Oregon. With that, the party's attention shifted to the June 4 California primary. Kennedy won, with 46% of the vote, against 42% for McCarthy.

That night, around midnight California time, he stood before his happy supporters in the ballroom of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles and gave them some serious talk and some wisecracks about his dog Freckles. Among his last words from the rostrum: "I think we can end the divisions within the United States, the violence." Then he walked through a serving pantry that led to the pressroom, his next stop. In the hotel serving pantry, Sirhan Sirhan, a Jordanian Arab living as a resident alien in the U.S., shot Kennedy in the head with a .22-cal. pistol.

Tom Hayden, a leader of S.D.S. and now a California state assemblyman, may sometimes have shared the radicals' feelings of cynicism and contempt for Bobby Kennedy, at least while Kennedy lived. But Hayden went to St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City and wept at Kennedy's casket, holding a Cuban fatigue cap in his hand. The year had many legacies, but the assassinations were among the most important and were the hardest to bear. They altered history and broke something essential in the national morale -- they broke hope. "The best leaders of our time were dead," Hayden says now. "They had been murdered. That is the heart of the tragedy. By 1968 I knew I was part of an apocalypse, which is different from the early idealism. You feel you are carried by events that are out of your control."

Hayden thinks Kennedy would have won the Democratic nomination in 1968 and then gone on to defeat Richard Nixon in November and served two terms in the White House, leaving office in January 1977. Richard Goodwin worked as an adviser and speechwriter for both John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy. He remembers talking to Bobby on the night he was killed. "He believed," recalls Goodwin, "that he probably wouldn't get the nomination. He was sure that Johnson would do anything to stop him." Goodwin shared Kennedy's pessimism at the time, but now, 20 years later, says the nomination could have been won. The way the Chicago convention evolved and erupted, Goodwin reasons, would have played to Kennedy's strengths.

What if Bobby Kennedy had lived and been elected President? It can be argued that Sirhan Sirhan's nihilistic gesture changed American history more profoundly than any other event since the death of Franklin Roosevelt. Without Sirhan, would there have been no Nixon, no Watergate, and possibly therefore no Jimmy Carter, and possibly therefore no Ronald Reagan? The long historical tumble of the past 20 years may have begun in that hotel serving pantry. Of course, that sort of hypothesis is merely a fantastic antiworld. Such speculations are idle and infinite.

In any case, with Kennedy's death, a large number of the American young felt that they had become disenfranchised and were now orphaned from the nation's political system.

What is lost when heroes vanish? Henry David Thoreau (a man who would have been at home in 1968) wrote an enigmatic throwaway line in Walden: "I long ago lost a hound, a bay horse and a turtle dove, and am still on their $ trail." The words,

vaguely allegorical and haunting, have something in common with Paul Simon's "Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio?" One has only to inspect the field of presidential candidates in 1988 to feel a sense of some hero loss in the drama of American life.

Perhaps it is an immature impulse to wish for heroes. In the early '80s many of the young adopted the oldest American President, Ronald Reagan, as a kind of hero -- not a moral or political hero exactly, but rather a sort of hero of attitude, not a leader so much as a prince of nonchalance. That sort of hero does not nourish much, or perform the hero's function of inspiring people to be better, to do better.

On the other hand: Once America was more inclined to look for the best of itself in its leaders, to invest more faith and hope in them. Now, 20 years later, says Ralph Whitehead of the University of Massachusetts, a more realistic society may be better than its leaders.

Chicago

Nothing is more theatrical than apocalypse, and the air that year was nervy with intimations of last days. Chicago was a masterpiece of the form.

The young men and women of the "movement," the antiwar and anti- Establishment young, had lost their voice in the political process. After Kennedy's death, Eugene McCarthy seemed to vanish from the moral horizon, even though he remained in the race. Hubert Humphrey had endured his long humiliation as Johnson's Vice President, and was the anointed one.

As the summer reached its climax, the Democrats and the forces of protest came to Chicago. For a long time the nation had been flirting with forms of gotterdammerung, with extremes of vocabulary and behavior and an appetite for violent resolution.

Chicago tore the wiring out of the Democratic Party. Wrote Todd Gitlin: "What exploded in Chicago that week was the product of pressures that had been building up for almost a decade." Traditional Democratic liberalism had exhausted itself over Viet Nam. The antiwar forces in the party, especially the young, had grown "radicalized," as they said, and pushed into new territories of recklessness and

resolve. As much as any event in 1968, Chicago is an origin myth of the tribe. Grant Park, Lincoln Park, Michigan Avenue. Those were battle names. Chicago was an extravagant dramatization of America's war with itself. "The truth is that these were our children in the streets and the Chicago police beat them up," wrote Tom Wicker of the New York Times , after he watched Daley's cops wade into the scruffy, taunting, passionate young. The air was filthy with tear gas and Yippies' stink bombs and obscenities and a palpable, murderous rage. The American id thrashed up into view of the world. There were both gaiety and terror in the spectacle, and a sheer bizarre surprise.

Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, the Yippies' brilliant impresarios, compiled a ridiculous mock agenda that the authorities took in earnest: the Yippies threatened to put LSD into the city's water supplies, to drug the delegates' food, to get "hyperpotent" male Yippies to seduce the delegates' wives, to paint cars to look like taxis and kidnap delegates to Wisconsin. The underground Express Times warned, "If you're going to Chicago, be sure to wear some armor in your hair" -- a sardonic echo of the sweet flower-child tune of the summer before ("If you're going to San Francisco, be sure to wear some flowers in your hair").

Chicago was mischief and political subversion on a grand scale. The demonstrators, under the gaze of television cameras, provoked Daley's police to rage. There were unarticulated class antagonisms at work -- many of the demonstrators being children of comparative affluence, the police coming from the city's blue-collar and ethnic neighborhoods. The adrenaline of that difference gave the clubs more force when the cops at last cut loose and went after the kids' ribs and skulls.

It was a media event with flowing blood and absurdist overtones. The aging Beat poet Allen Ginsberg chanted om in Lincoln Park. Jean Genet, the French homosexual playwright and ex-convict, wrote titillated prose about how attractive and powerful the cops' thighs were. Abbie Hoffman developed a cordial relationship with the plainclothes policemen assigned to tail him everywhere, but he shook them sometimes and spirited around town in a score of disguises.

The war in the streets raged on, and in the hall Ribicoff reprimanded Daley in a tableau that symbolized the end of the rule of the back room and the boss in the Democratic Party. From that day on, the Democratic Party, carrying with it the

G.O.P., would struggle to institutionalize the "open democracy" that was one of the ideals of 1968. Each step of the way, with each new reform and primary rule, the process would become messier and more unwieldy. As a result, the party leaders chosen by the back-room bosses, people like John Kennedy and Adlai Stevenson, were succeeded by contenders like George McGovern and Jimmy Carter, who could best catch the whims of the moment and spend the most time courting voters in the states with early primaries.

The antiwar Democrats' distaste for Hubert Humphrey seemed somehow more virulent than their feelings about Richard Nixon, possibly because Humphrey for so long had served the hated warmaker Lyndon Johnson. Nixon, who had been nominated in Miami three weeks before Chicago, somehow did not figure in the demonology just then. He was off the radar. Miami was sedate compared with Chicago, but almost anything this side of a combat zone would have been. Nixon surprised the convention by choosing a vice-presidential running mate named Spiro Agnew, the Governor of Maryland who had drawn some attention in the spring by his tough dealing with rioters after the King assassination.

The Moon

Nineteen sixty-eight had a kind of Aristotelian logic, the proportions of tragedy. Hope begot death, revolution begot counterrevolution.

In America the great uprising on the political and cultural left was answered by the rising of George Wallace's army on the right. Wallace, truculent and charismatic in a darkling way, ran a third-party campaign that attracted a large following among blue-collar workers, ethnics and Middle Americans who felt abandoned by their own country and its politics. There was poetry, if not logic, in the fact that many voters who would have supported Robert Kennedy switched to Wallace after Kennedy's death. Kennedy and Wallace, so different in most ways, drew from the same deep pools of passion and longing for a voice.

In Czechoslovakia during the spring, the Communist Party led by Alexander Dubcek undertook reforms that now seem a distant forerunner of Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost -- efforts to humanize the socialist structure, to encourage greater individual discretion. Euphoria bloomed in the "Prague Spring." But the Soviets could not tolerate that measure of autonomy in their satellite, any more than they could abide

Hungary in 1956 or, later, Poland in 1981. In August 1968, Soviet and other Warsaw Pact tanks rolled into Prague and crushed the hope. Not long after, Dubcek ended up working obscurely for the Forestry Administration in western Slovakia.

Those tanks may have been a blessing for Richard Nixon. The Communists who rolled into Prague were not small peasants in black pajamas fighting in their own villages but living specters of the old cold war, of which Nixon was a ^ battle-hardened veteran. Even so, the election results in November were a portrait of a society deeply divided. Nixon and Humphrey split the popular vote almost evenly (at 43%), and George Wallace won 13.5% in the largest third-party turnout since Robert La Follette won 17% in 1924.

As the annus mirabilis drew to an end, Nixon and his aides, John Erlichman and Bob Haldeman were busy in a suite on the 39th floor of the Pierre Hotel in Manhattan, assembling the new Administration, a new cast of characters -- Henry Kissinger, John Mitchell and the rest. The nation soon would be off on a different road, or so one imagined. It would be another four years before the U.S. withdrew from Viet Nam, and another seven years before the North Vietnamese armies would sweep south and accomplish the result that American power had sought so long to prevent. During 1968, an addditional 16,000 Americans died in the war. By the time the polished black granite of the Viet Nam Memorial was installed in Washington in 1982 -- an act of national reconciliation that took years -- more than 58,000 names of the dead had to be inscribed on the stone.

On Christmas Eve 1968, three American astronauts -- Frank Borman, William Anders and James Lovell -- were making revolutions around the moon in the Apollo 8 spacecraft. Lovell, now a corporate executive in Chicago, describes the event in a charming mix of metaphors: "It was the final bright star in the last gasp of 1968." The messy earth looked different from a distance, "that bright loveliness in the eternal cold," as Archibald MacLeish wrote.

Nineteen sixty-eight was more than a densely compacted parade of events, more than the accidental alignment of planets. It was a tragedy of change, a struggle between generations, to some extent a war between the past and the future, and even, for an entire society, a violent struggle to grow up.

After 1968, much of the drama lay ahead (the Weatherman's Days of Rage, Woodstock, Altamont, Kent State), and then the long dispersals of the '60s generation into the '70s. But the events of the origin myth ended sometime around the November election of Richard Nixon, when, it may be, history seemed to have been ceded back to the fathers, and recalled from timelessness into time.