

1968: Two Perspectives, Fifty Years Later

1968 is widely recognized as one of the more important years in recent history. Fifty years on, HSP is running a blog series exploring the events of that year and their lasting impact. Look for a new blog post each week exploring topics from the 1960s and highlighting collections and programs at HSP.

Our first post focuses on the question 'Why 1968'? To tease out an answer, we are sharing two perspectives: the first from Alice George, a historian and journalist who lived through that tumultuous year, and the second from Jo Mikula, a college junior who spent her summer researching it.

The Dreamers and the Dream

By Alice George

In 1968, America seemed to be falling apart: anti-war protests, race riots, political assassination, and white backlash against the civil rights movement all combined to create what seemed like a centrifugal force that would tear the United States into bits. In many ways, it was a horrible year when Americans seemed to be at war with themselves: generation against generation, race against race, conservative against liberal.

Perhaps more importantly, the year should be remembered as the last time when leading Americans, such as Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and millions of followers unashamedly argued that the nation had an obligation to conquer poverty among our own people. For a brief moment in the mid-1960s, many Americans truly sought to change the lot of the nation's poorest citizens instead of blaming them for their circumstances. Since 1968, American discourse has focused more on ideas like preserving law and order, lowering the taxes of the rich to bolster the economy, maintaining national security, and—more recently—blocking immigration from poor nations.

So many ideals that quivered on the precipice in 1968—the inspiration to do good, to shift money from war to social problems, to remain open to new ideas, to make racial and gender equality a reality, and to seek economic solutions to remake the nation's slums—are now lost in a web of cynicism. The United States survived 1968, but many of that year's hopes lie dormant and without voice 50 years later. If we have any possibility of reviving those sparks of optimism, we must remember the dreamers and the dream.

*Alice George is a historian and journalist who sits on the Board of Councilors of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. She is the author of *Awaiting Armageddon: How Americans Faced the Cuban Missile Crisis and The Assassination of John F. Kennedy: Political Trauma and American Memory* as well a contributor to many other publications.*

Successes and Shortcomings

By Jo Mikula

The 1960s, to me, were a time characterized by the recognition of injustice and by a spirit of protest. As a young college student, I see a similar drive in 2018 to address the systems of power that privilege some and disempower others. Given the connections between these two periods, it seems particularly important to look back on the social movements of the 1960s and draw lessons from their successes and their shortcomings.

The social media age has facilitated organized protests, but it has also made it easier to sit at home and give support to social issues through the internet without engaging in a sustained campaign. In contrast, the movements of the 1960s relied heavily on a physical presence and participation: Cecil B. Moore organized over 6 months of continuous protests outside of Girard College in a call to desegregate the school; Bayard Rustin helped Martin Luther King Jr. organize the Montgomery Bus Boycott; the Black Panthers coordinated programs that provided school lunches for underprivileged black children. The activist movements of the 60s remind us that, while activism on social media has its place, a physical presence is often an important part of protest.

Some of these posts in the 1968 series will touch upon the ways in which movements overlooked the struggles of their own members. We will revisit a Miss America protest during which white feminists willfully overlooked the unique struggles of black women and even attacked the black feminists who dared to question their agenda. The Black Panther Party, meanwhile, often perpetuated sexism as they fought for the rights of black Americans. While modern activist movements have grown to focus more on intersectionality, this problem persists; as recently as 2017, #MeToo was criticized for failing to give adequate representation to women of color.

Ultimately, these blog posts will help us question what it means to organize and participate in a movement for social change. When is sharing an article on Facebook enough, and when is a more sustained physical presence necessary? How are contemporary movements neglecting the struggles of others? The legacy of 1968 can help us engage with these issues more closely and inspire us to continue building on the work of earlier activists.

Jo Mikula was the Haverford Philly Partners intern at HSP during the summer of 2018. An English and French major, she has interests in writing and history. During her internship she developed the 1968 blog series, building upon collections research done previously by intern Madison Arnold-Scerbo, also from Haverford College.
