

# Brief History Of Chicago's 1968 Democratic Convention

(Sources: "Miami and the Siege of Chicago" by Norman Mailer, Facts on File, CQ's Guide to U.S. Elections)

The 1968 Democratic Convention, held on August 26-29th, stands as an important event in the nation's political and cultural history. The divisive politics of the convention, brought about by the Vietnam war policies of President Johnson, prompted the Democratic party to completely overhaul its rules for selecting presidential delegates -- opening up the political process to millions. The violence between police and anti-Vietnam war protesters in the streets and parks of Chicago gave the city a black-eye from which it has yet to completely recover. The following is a brief history of the events leading up to the convention, the convention itself and the riots surrounding it.

## Events Leading up the 1968 Convention Riots

The primary cause of the demonstrations and the subsequent riots during the 1968 Chicago convention was opposition to the Vietnam War. Young peace activists had met at a camp in Lake Villa, Illinois on March 23 to plan a protest march at the convention. Anti-war leaders including David Dellinger (editor of Liberation magazine and chairman of the National Mobilization Committee to End War in Vietnam) Rennie Davis, head of the Center for Radical Research and a leader of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), Vernon Grizzard, a draft resistance leader, and Tom Hayden (also a leader of the Students for a Democratic Society) coordinated efforts with over 100 anti-war groups.

Groups related to this effort also planned events. Jerry Rubin (a former associate of Dellinger) and Abbie Hoffman (both leaders of the Youth International Party (YIPPIES)) planned a Youth Festival with the goal of bringing 100,000 young adults to Chicago. They tried to get a permit from Chicago to hold a YIPPIE convention. The permit was denied, but the YIPPIES still came.

On March 31, President Johnson announced he would not seek re-election. Johnson's favorability ratings were in the mid-30% range and polls showed even less support for his Vietnam War policies (about 23%.) The announcement created uncertainty in the anti-war groups' convention plans. Many anti-war activists also became involved in the presidential campaigns of war opponents such as Sen. Robert Kennedy (D-NY), Sen. Eugene McCarthy (D-WI) and Sen. George McGovern (D-SD).

However, by early April there was much talk of Hubert Humphrey, Johnson's Vice President, running for the presidency. Humphrey officially entered the race on April 27th. Because of his close identity with the Johnson administration, the plans for demonstrations were not cancelled.

Other events preceding the 1968 Democratic convention contributed to the tense national mood. On April 4, civil rights leader Martin Luther King was assassinated and riots broke out throughout the country. (This included Chicago, where Mayor Daley reportedly gave a "shoot to kill" instruction to police.) On June 3, artist and cultural icon Andy Warhol was shot. Finally, on June 5th, presidential candidate Robert Kennedy (President John Kennedy's brother) was shot in the head after winning the California primary. He died the next day. There also were countless protests against the Vietnam war at this time. Student protesters effectively shut down Columbia University in April.

## **Attempts to Move the Convention from Chicago**

Many Democrats were eager to move their national convention from Chicago to Miami, where the Republicans were to hold their nominating event. Democrats were concerned not only about the possibility of unruly protests, an ongoing telephone strike in Chicago threatened to cause logistical nightmares. The television networks also lobbied to move the event to Miami -- TV and phone lines already were installed at the Republican convention site. In addition, because of the phone strike in Chicago, television cameras would be limited to the hotels and the convention center -- new phone lines were needed to cover outside events. Any footage taken outside this area would have to be shot on film, which would require processing before it was broadcast.

Mayor Richard J. Daley would not let the convention leave Chicago. He promised to enforce the peace and allow no outrageous demonstrations. He also threatened to withdraw support for Humphrey, the apparent nominee, if the convention was moved. President Johnson also wanted to keep the convention in Chicago and is rumored to have said "Miami is not an American city."

## **The Convention**

Humphrey came to Chicago with the nomination virtually sewn up -- he had between 100 and 200 more delegates than he needed, as well as the support of blacks, labor groups and Southern Democrats. However, he still felt his nomination was in jeopardy.

Humphrey was clearly seen as Johnson's man. President Johnson still had a grip over the convention, even going as far as to ensure states supportive of him received the best seats at the convention hall. But Johnson did not show up for the event.

Mayor Daley, who wanted Ted Kennedy to run for President, caucused his delegation of 118 the weekend before the convention and decided to remain "uncommitted." Humphrey also was at risk from the growing anti-war wing of the Democratic party. After vacillating between the pro-war policies of the Johnson administration and the anti-war policies of his opponents, Humphrey made it clear on CBS's *Face The Nation* the weekend before the convention he supported President Johnson's Vietnam policies.

Humphrey faced a major credentials fight. Delegations from 15 states tried to unseat Humphrey's delegates and seat anti-Vietnam delegates. Humphrey's forces won every fight.

There also was maneuvering behind the scenes at the Conrad Hilton (where the press and the Democratic party were staying) to try and get Sen. Ted Kennedy to run.

Sen. Dan Inouye (D-HI) gave the keynote address, but it was decidedly downbeat, with 10 of 13 pages devoted to what's wrong with the country. (Keynote speeches are usually upbeat affirmations of the party.)

The most contentious issue was Vietnam, and the debate on the minority "peace plank." The convention managers scheduled the debate for late (past prime-time) Tuesday night, but the peace delegates staged a protest and it was rescheduled for the next afternoon.

Debate was limited to one hour for each side and structured to prevent hostile exchanges. Rep. Phil Burton (D-CA) was the featured speaker in support of the peace plank, Sen. Edmund Muskie (D-ME) was the featured speaker in support of the Johnson-Humphrey language. After the Humphrey language was approved, the New York and California delegations began to sing "We Shall Overcome" and more delegations marched around the convention floor in protest. Television made it impossible for the convention planners to hide the protests of delegates favoring the peace plank. Even if planners tried to hide rebel delegations (such as New York and California) by placing them in the back of the convention hall and turning down their microphones, a camera and sound-man covering the floor could easily broadcast their protests across the nation.

During the debate on the peace plank, the worst day of rioting occurred outside the Amphitheater, in the so-called "Battle of Michigan Avenue."

Humphrey was nominated by Mayor Joseph Alioto of San Francisco. (His daughter is now running for Congress in California.) Sen. George McGovern was nominated by Sen. Abraham Ribicoff (D-MA), who shocked the convention by saying, "With George McGovern as President of the United States we wouldn't have Gestapo tactics in the streets of Chicago." Mayor Daley erupted in anger and shook his fist at Ribicoff. Most reports of the event also say Daley yelled an off-color epithet beginning with an "F," but according to CNN executive producer Jack Smith, others close to Daley insist he shouted "Faker," meaning Ribicoff was not a man of his word, the lowest name one can be called in Chicago's Irish politics.

Humphrey easily won the nomination by more than a 1,000 votes, with the delegation from Pennsylvania putting him over the top.

On the last day, Thursday, the convention opened with a film tribute to Bobby Kennedy. Also, Mayor Daley printed up hundreds of "We Love You Daley" signs and orchestrated a pro-Daley demonstration in the convention to contrast with the negative image the city had gained during the course of the convention.

Humphrey chose Sen. Edmund Muskie (D-ME) to be his running mate. Julian Bond, the African-American civil rights activist, was nominated for Vice President, but withdrew because he was 28 years old, under the constitutional age (35) to hold the office.

## **The Riots**

Outside the official convention proceedings, anti-war demonstrators clashed with 11,900 Chicago police, 7500 Army troops, 7500 Illinois National Guardsmen and 1000 Secret Service agents over 5 days.

The violence centered on two things: the Chicago police forcing protesters out of areas where they were not permitted to be; and protesters clashing with police, and their reinforcements, as they tried to march to the convention site.

The violence began Sunday August 25th. Anti-war leaders had tried to get permits from the city to sleep in Lincoln park and to demonstrate outside of the convention site. Those permit requests were denied, although the city did offer them a permit to protest miles away from the Amphitheater But the protesters were undeterred. When the park was officially closed, Chicago police bombed protesters with tear gas and moved in with billy-clubs to forcibly remove them from the park. Along with the many injuries to anti-war protesters, 17 reporters were attacked by police (including Hal Bruno, who was then a reporter for Newsweek and is now political director for ABC.) Throughout the convention, police would see the press as the enemy. Subsequent battles between police and protesters occurred nightly in Lincoln Park and Grant Park.

Also present that first night and throughout the convention were the famous Beat artists Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs and French poet Jean Genet. Most events and protests featured speeches from Tom Hayden, Rennie Davis, Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin.

The worst day of protesting was Wednesday, and was dubbed the "Battle of Michigan Avenue." Protesters were stopped in their march to the convention site and the media recorded graphic violence on the part of the Chicago police. Many innocent bystanders, reporters and doctors offering medical help were severely beaten by the police. Many hotels where the delegates were staying were affected by the riots. Fumes from the tear gas used by the police and "stink bombs" thrown by the protesters drifted into the buildings. (One of those affected was the Conrad Hilton, the headquarters for the Democratic party and the press.)

Another major clash occurred on the final day of the convention, when protesters tried once again to reach the convention center. They were twice turned away. A barricade was put up around the convention center to prevent anyone without credentials from entering the facility.

When the convention was finally over, the Chicago police reported 589 arrests had been made and 119 police and 100 protesters were injured. The riots, which were widely covered by the media, led to a government funded study to determine the cause of the violence. The study was led by Daniel Walker, a Democratic businessman from Illinois who would run successfully for governor in Illinois in 1972. The study placed most of the blame on the Chicago police. Mayor Daley disagreed with the report and issued the Chicago police a pay raise.

## **The Aftermath**

On March 20, 1969, a Chicago grand jury indicted eight police officers and eight civilians in connection with the disorders during the Democratic convention. The eight civilians, dubbed the "Chicago 8," were the first persons to be charged under provisions of the 1968 Civil Rights act, which made it a federal crime to cross state lines to incite a riot. David Dellinger was chairman of the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam. Rennie Davis and Tom Hayden were members of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin were leaders of the Youth International Party (YIPPIES). Lee Weiner was a research assistant at Northwestern University. John Froines was a professor at the University of Oregon. Bobby Seale was a founder of the Black Panthers.

The trial of the "Chicago 8" opened before Judge Julius Hoffman in Chicago on September 24, 1969. It was a circus. The defendants disrupted the trial and talked back to the judge. The defense attorneys repeatedly accused the judge of bias against them. Because of Seale's repeated courtroom outbursts, Hoffman had ordered him gagged and chained to his chair on October 29. When the restraints were removed on November 3, Seale resumed his outbursts, calling Hoffman a "racist," a "facist" and a "pig." Seale's trial was severed from the other seven on November 5, 1969 when Hoffman declared a mistrial on the conspiracy charges and sentenced him to four years in prison for contempt.

The long "Chicago 7" case finally went to the jury on February 14, 1970. The next day Judge Hoffman convicted all 7 defendants, plus defense attorneys William Kunstler and Leonard Weinglass, of contempt of court. (Kunstler had told the judge the trial was a "legal lynching" for which Judge Hoffman was "wholly responsible.") The jury returned its verdicts on February 18, 1970. Froines and Weiner were acquitted. Dellinger, Davis, Hayden, Hoffman and Ruben were convicted of crossing state lines with intent to incite a riot and giving inflammatory speeches to further their purpose. They were fined \$5,000 each, plus court costs, and given five years in prison.