



The election of 1968 in

by C. Desmond Hart

C. Desmond Hart, of York's History department describes the actual lack of liberalism in American history. The '68 Election is no phenomenon.

The cocktail hour had scarcely begun...

The cocktail hour had scarcely begun on the West Coast on election night of 1964 when it became clear that Lyndon Baines Johnson would remain in the White House, endorsed by the largest presidential vote in United States history. Liberals from Maine to California rejoiced as Barry Goldwater, the darling of the Radical Right in the early 1960's, enjoyed relatively little success outside the states of the Old Confederacy.

Few seemed concerned that twenty-six million Americans had preferred the Senator from Arizona to a president already ranked by some to hold the office. Extremism had ap-

parently peaked at the Republican bloodbath in the Cow Palace in San Francisco, and the country could look forward to eight more years of peace and prosperity under The Great Society. Even Theodore H. White must have wondered if ever again in his lifetime would the making of the president be a subject worthy of his considerable powers as a story-teller.

Now on the eve of the 1968 election it is the Democratic party that lies in ruins. Viet Nam and Lyndon Johnson have divided the nation as it has not been divided since the Civil War. The civil rights movement has progressed from reconstruction to revolution.

The Great Society is a shambles. Martin Luther King has gone to the promised land. The last hope of the Democratic party, and perhaps the nation, lies beside his martyred brother in an Arlington grave. From the heights of optimism the country has apparently fallen in four short years to the depths of pessimism.

What has happened? What has gone wrong in the land of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; in the home of the free and the brave? Are the forces of ultra-conservatism, apparently scattered for a generation in the landslide of 1964, about to take over a nation suddenly gone mad?

Attempts to answer such questions must first come to grips with the myth of the American liberal tradition. Although to most American historians the history of their country has differed from that of Europe mainly because of the influence of this liberal tradition, a rapid survey of the major eras of reform, those periods when the country was apparently more liberal than ordinarily, suggests that even in its most liberal hours the United States has been a rather conservative land, that the conservative reaction of the moment is not all that out of character.

From the Revolution to the Great Society...

From the Revolution to The Great Society conservative tendencies have marked American reform movements. The Declaration of Independence is a poor introduction to a movement which listed George Washington among its leadership. That Thomas Jefferson, author of the great statement of revolutionary idealism and frontman for "Jeffersonian Democracy", was any more liberal than Alexander Hamilton of the supposedly reactionary Federalists is

doubtful. Both the Jacksonians of the 1830's and the Populists of the 1890's may be viewed as prejudiced farmers who were mainly interested in the return to the simpler times before the onslaught of industrialism. Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and John Fitzgerald Kennedy could hardly be described as "fire-eating" liberals; before November of 1963 nobody had ever mistaken Lyndon Baines Johnson for anything but a Texas conservative.

The marked conservatism of even the reform eras in United States history is brilliantly illustrated by the mid-nineteenth century antislavery movement. In addition, the crusade against slavery illustrates two other forces which have been constant in American history and which are of prime importance in 1968 — constitutionalism and racism.

The conservative character of antislavery politics is best demonstrated by the career of Abraham

Lincoln, the man it made famous. Although known to history as the Great Emancipator, he really emancipated few slaves and would never have been a charter member of C.O.R.E. He favoured emancipation over a period of decades and colonization to Central America or elsewhere. He and his antislavery associates were constitutional conservatives who had no intention of attacking slavery in the states of the Old South.

Included in the ranks of the anti-slavery party...

Included in the ranks of the anti-slavery party were some of the most outspoken racists of the day. They eventually brought the sections to the edge of war in 1861 over the extension of slavery to the territories, not because they had any desire to bring equality to the slave millions, but because decades of political frustration had produced intense anti-Southern feelings. In the end it was this racism of the North, not the Ku Klux Klan of the South, which was responsible for the tragic failures of Reconstruction.

Indeed, one might argue that there was only one radically liberal reform movement in American history, the one led by the Radical Republicans of the middle 1860's. For three short

years Thaddeus Stevens and his small band of followers threw caution to the winds and attempted to provide the Negro with the tools which would have made his freedom more than a token. They failed in this mission (although the legislation they passed has been put to good use in the 1960's.) Because they broke with American tradition, put racism aside, and interpreted the sacred Constitution of 1789 rather loosely, the Radical Republicans have remained suspect ever since.

A century has brought little change. American boys grow to manhood steeped in the belief that their eighteenth century form of government is the best available in the world of the twentieth century. (It is

no coincidence that the civil rights movement of the early 1960's was focused on the courts, that law and order is the central issue of campaign '68.) Capitalism is good and communism and/or socialism bad. Big government is necessarily bad government. Time is the great equalizer, even though Negroes may be tired after a wait of three centuries.

Unfortunately, the later 1960's has seen the emergence of a number of other forces which have contributed to the present political crisis: the lingering idealism of the Revolution and hatred of communism which fosters the American as policeman of the world; the urban dislocation; the alienation of major interest groups; and the breakdown of the democratic

process. Finally, there has been the incredible "leadership" of LBJ.

While other eras of history have had to deal with many of these same forces, none has had to face all half-dozen at the same time. Post-Civil War Americans had to contend with the Negro and the city, but foreign policy was not a consideration. Some members of the younger generation of the 1920's were alienated, but a few years on the Left Bank and they were ready for Babbitt. The Cold War and McCarthyism troubled the 1950's; but youth was complacent, the Negro still knew his place; and General Eisenhower, one of the most popular of all presidents, reigned in Washington (even while Senator Johnson ruled.)