BACK TO OUR FUTURE

HOW THE 1980s EXPLAIN THE WORLD WE LIVE IN NOW—OUR CULTURE, OUR POLITICS, OUR EVERYTHING

DAVID SIROTA
DIE, HIPPIE, DIE!

Every time one of these ex-hippies comes prancing in from yesteryear, we gotta get out the love beads and pretend we care about people. —ALEX P. KEATON, 1986

For the past several days I've been noticing a steep rise in the number of hippies coming to town. . . . I know hippies. I've hated them all my life. I've kept this town free of hippies on my own since I was five and a half. But I can't contain them on my own anymore. We have to do something, fast! —ERIC CARTMAN, 2005

I n 1975, a Democratic Party emboldened by civil rights, environmental, antiwar, and post-Watergate electoral successes was on the verge of seizing the presidency and a filibuster-proof congressional majority. That year, The Rocky Horror Picture Show and One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest were two of the three top-grossing films—the former a parody using the late-sixties sexual revolution to laugh at the puritanical fifties, the latter based on the novel by beat writer Ken Kesey. Meanwhile, three of the top-rated seven television shows were liberal-themed programs produced by progressive icon Norman Lear, including All in the Family—a show built around a hippie, Mike Stivic, poking fun at the ignorance of his traditionalist father-in-law, Archie Bunker.
A mere ten years later, Republican Ronald Reagan had just been reelected by one of the largest electoral landslides in American history, and his party had also gained control of the U.S. Senate. Two of the top three grossing films were Back to the Future, which eulogized the fifties, and Rambo: First Blood Part II, which blamed sixties antiwar activism for losing the Vietnam conflict. Most telling, All in the Family’s formula of using sixties-motivated youth and progressivism to ridicule fifties-rooted parents and their traditionalism had been replaced atop the television charts by its antithesis: a Family Ties whose fifties-inspired youth ridicules his parents’ sixties spirit.

The political and cultural trends these changes typified were neither coincidental nor unrelated, and their intertwined backstories explain why we’re still scarred by the metamorphosis.

The late 1970s and early 1980s marked the birth of an entire industry organized around idealized nostalgia, and particularly midcentury, pre-1965 schmaltz. You likely know this industry well—it survives in everything from roadside Cracker Barrel restaurants to the Jersey shore’s Old Time photo stands to Michael Chabon’s novels to Band of Brothers-style miniseries glorifying the valor of World War II vets—and it first found traction in the 1980s creation of The Fifties™.

Turning a time period into a distinct brand seems common today, what with the all-pervasive references to generational subgroups (Gen X, Gen Y, etc.). But it was a new marketing innovation back in the 1980s. As Temple University professor Carolyn Kitch found in her 2003 study of mass-circulation magazines, generational labeling is “primarily a phenomena of the last quarter of the 20th century,” and it began (as so many things have) as an early-1980s ad strategy aimed at selling products to Baby Boomers and their parents.

Like all sales pitches, fifties hawking employed subjectivity, oversimplification, and stereotypes. For eighties journalists, advertisers, screenwriters, and political operatives seeking a compelling shorthand to break through the modern media miasma, that meant making The Fifties into much more than the ten-year period between 1950 and 1959. It meant using pop culture and politics to convert the style, language, and memories of that decade into a larger reference to the entire first half of the twentieth century, all the way through the early 1960s of the New Frontier—those optimistic years “before President Kennedy was shot, before the Beatles came, when I couldn’t wait to join the Peace Corps, and I thought I’d never find a guy as great as my dad,” as Baby from the classic eighties film Dirty Dancing reminisced.*

Why The Fifties, and not the 1930s or ’40s, as the face of the entire pre-sixties epoch? Because that decade was fraught with far less (obvious) baggage (say, the Depression or global war) and hence was most easily marketed in the saccharine entertainment culture of the devil-may-care 1980s.

Indeed, as the Carter presidency started to crumble in 1978 and Reagan began delivering fiery speeches in preparation for his upcoming presidential run, the crew-cut-and-greaser escapades of Happy Days and the poodle skirts of Laverne & Shirley overtook the sixties-referencing urbaniety, ethnicity, and strife of Norman Lear’s grittier sitcoms. In movie theaters, Animal House and Grease hit classic status almost instantly. These successes encouraged the culture industry to make the eighties the launching point for a self-sustaining genre of wildly popular back-to-the-fifties productions.

There were retrospectives such as Diner, Stand By Me, and Peggy Sue Got Married and biopics of fifties icons such as The Right Stuff, La Bamba, and Great Balls of Fire! There was Hoosiers, with its bucolic small towns, its small, short, and its nonbreakaway rims. There were Broadway plays such as Brighton Beach Memoirs and Biloxi Blues, commemorating the honor, frugality, and innocence of the World War II years. And there was a glut of new Eisenhower biographies.

Even 1980s productions not overtly focused on decade nostalgia were decidedly recollective of fifties atmospheres.

There was Witness, which used the story of a Philadelphia cop’s voyage into lily-white Amish country to juxtapose the simplicity of America’s pastoral heritage against the crime-ridden anarchy of the black inner city.

There was Superman and Superman II—films that reanimated a TV

*For this reason, “the fifties” refers in this chapter to the entire cultural era after World War II through the 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Similarly, “the sixties” refers to the cultural era from the Kennedy assassination through the mid-1970s.
hero of the actual 1950s, idealized Clark Kent's midcentury youth, and depicted his adulthood as the trials of a fedora-wearing anachronism trying to save modern Metropolis from postfifties peril.* And there were the endless rip-offs—the Jets-versus-Sharks rivalry of West Side Story ripened into the socs-versus-greasers carnage of The Outsiders, while the hand-holding of Grease became the ass-grabbing of Dirty Dancing.

Through it all, pop culture was manufacturing a Total Recall of the 1950s for a 1980s audience—an artificial memory of The Fifties that even came with its own canned soundtrack.

Though we tend to think of the late 1970s and early 1980s as the glory days of punk rock and the primordial soup of what would become rap, Wurlitzer-ready rockabilly and doo-wop were the rage. This was the heyday of the Stray Cats and their standing base, the moment when Adam Ant released the jukebox jam "Goody Two Shoes," and Queen's rockabilly hit "Crazy Little Thing Called Love" hit number one on the charts. As the Hard Rock Cafe and Johnny Rockets franchises created a mini-fad of fifties-flavored restaurants, the B-52s' surf rock was catching a new wave; Meat Loaf was channeling his Elvis-impersonation act into the absurdist 1950s tribute "Paradise by the Dashboard Light"; and ZZ Top was starring in music videos featuring a muscle car that Danny Zuko might have driven at Thunder Road. Even Billy Joel, until then a folksinger, was going all in with a blatant teenybopper tribute, "Uptown Girl."

This sonic trend wasn't happening in a vacuum—it was thrumming in the shadow of the chief missionary of 1950s triumphalism, Ronald Reagan.

The Gipper's connection to The Fifties wasn't just rooted in his success as a midcentury B-movie actor nor in his American Graffiti pompadour. The Fifties had long defined his persona, career, and message. Here was "the candidate of nostalgia, a political performer whose be-bop instrument dates from an antediluvian choir," as The Washington Post wrote in 1980. Here was a man campaigning for president in the late 1970s and early 1980s calling for the country to go back in time. And not just a few years back in time—way back in time to the dreamy days before what he called the "hard years" of the late 1960s.

"Not so long ago, we emerged from a world war," Reagan said in a national address during his 1980 presidential campaign. "Turning homeward at last, we built a grand prosperity and hopes, from our own success and plenty, to help others less fortunate. Our peace was a tense and bitter one, but in those days, the center seemed to hold."

Writing to a campaign contributor, Reagan said he wanted to bring forth a "spiritual revival to feel once again as [we] felt years ago about this nation of ours." And when he won the White House, his inauguration spelled out exactly what he meant by "years ago": The lavish celebration dusted off and promoted fifties stars such as Frank Sinatra and Charlton Heston.

This wasn't a secret message or a wink-and-nod—it was the public theme of Reagan's political formula. In a Doonesbury comic about the 1980 campaign, cartoonist Gary Trudeau sketched Reagan's mind as "a storehouse of images of an idyllic America, with 5 cent Cokes, Burma Shave signs, and hard-working White People." When naming him 1980 "Man of the Year," Time said, "Intellectually, emotionally, Reagan lives in the past." The article added that the new president specifically believes "the past"—i.e., the The Fifties—"is his future." And as both the magazine and America saw it, that was the highest form of praise—just as it is today.

This all might have gone the way of New Coke if the early-1980s celebration of The Fifties™ was happening in isolation. But those Bob Ross paintings of happy Levittown trees and Eisenhower-era blue skies only became salient because the eighties placed them in the American imagination right next to sensationalized images of Woodstock and the Kent State massacre.

Securing that prime psychological real estate meant simultaneously doing to the sixties what was being done to the fifties—only
with one twist: Instead of an exercise in idealization, The Sixties™
brand that came out of the 1980s was fraught with value judgments
downplaying the decade's positives and emphasizing its chaos.

Through politics and mass media, a 1960s of unprecedented so-
cial and economic progress was rechristened as a time of tie-dye,
not thin ties; burning cities, not men on the moon; LBJ scowls, not
JFK glamour; redistributionist War on Poverty “welfare,” not univer-
salist Medicare benefits; faciaI-haired Beatles tripping out to “Lucy in
the Sky with Diamonds,” not bowl-cut Beatles chirping out “I Want
to Hold Your Hand.”

Some of the sixties bashing in the 1980s came from a media that
earnestly sought to help Baby Boomers forgive themselves for becom-
ing the buttoned-down adults they had once rebelled against. Some of
it was the inadvertent side effect of an accelerating twenty-four-hour
news cycle that historian Daniel Marcus notes almost always coupled
references to the sixties with quick “shots from Woodstock of young
people cavorting in the mud, perhaps discarding various parts of their
clothing or stumbling through a drug-induced haze.”

And some of it was just the unconvincing laziness of screenwriters
and directors.

“Getting a popular fix on the more elusive, more complicated,
and far more common phenomena of the sixties is demanding be-
cause a lot of it isn’t photogenic,” says Columbia professor Todd
Gitlin, the former leader of Students for a Democratic Society
and author of The Sixties. “How easy it was to instead just make films
about the wild people, because they are already an action movie, and
their conception of themselves is already theatrical.”

The revisionism and caricaturing revolved around three key
themes, each of which denigrated the sixties as 100 percent awful.
The first was the most political of all—patriotism. Love of coun-
try, loyalty to America, national unity—these were memes that Rea-
gan had been using to berate the sixties since his original jump from
Hollywood to politics.

During his first campaign for California governor, he ran on a
platform pledging to crush the “small minority of beatniks, radicals,
and filthy speech advocates” at Berkeley who were protesting the
Vietnam War. As president, he railed on nuclear-freeze protesters
(like Steven and Elyse Keaton in that first season of Family Ties) as tra-
itors “who would place the United States in a position of military and
moral inferiority.”

The media industry of the time followed with hypermilitarist
films blaming antiwar activists for America’s loss in Vietnam (more on
that in the chapter “Operation Red Dawn”), and magazine retrospec-
tives basically implying that sixties social movements were anti-
American. As just one example, a 1988 Newsweek article entitled
“Decade Shock” cited the fact that “patriotism is back in vogue” as
proof that the country had rejected the sixties—the idea being that
the sixties was wholly unpatriotic.

But while flag-waving can win elections and modify the political
debate, it alone could not mutate the less consciously political, more
reptilian lobes of the American cortex. So the 1980s contest for his-
torical memory was also being waged with more refined and demog-
ographically targeted methods.

For teenagers, The Fifties™ were used to vulgarize The Sixties™
through a competition between the Beatnik and the Greaser for the
mantle of eighties cool. As historian Daniel Marcus recounts, the for-
er became defined as “middle-class, left-wing, intellectual and cen-
tered in New York City and San Francisco”—that is, defined as the
generic picture of weak, effete, snobbish coffeehouse liberalism first
linked to names such as Hart and Dukakis, and now synonymous
with Kerry, Streisand, and Soros. Meanwhile, the Greaser came to be
known as an urbanized cowboy—a tough guy who “liked cars and
girls and rock and roll, was working class, usually non-Jewish ‘white
ethnic’ and decidedly unintellectual.”

This hero, whose spirit we still worship in the form of Joe the
Plumber and “Bring it on” foreign policy, first stamped the Beatnik
through the youth-oriented iconography of the 1980s—think idols
such as the Fonz, Bruce Springsteen, and Patrick Swayze; movies like
Staying Alive, Rocky, and The Lords of Flatbush; bands such as Bon Jovi,
Guns N’ Roses, and Poison; and, not to be forgotten, the chintzy
clothing fad of ripped jeans and tight white T-shirts.

*In a sense, Reagan sounded just like Alex P. Keaton ripping on his parents, which
might explain why the president told reporters Family Ties was his favorite program
and why he offered to appear on an episode—an offer the show’s writers rejected.
For adults who experienced the real fifties and sixties, the propaganda had to be a bit less overt to be convincing. So their memories were more subtly shaped with the arrival of a life-form whose mission was to absorb the hippie generation for becoming the compromised and depoliticized elders they had once railed on and protested against.

This seductive species became known as yuppies—short for young urban professionals.

The invasion of the yuppies and all of their requisite tastes, styles, and linguistic inflections officially commenced when Newsweek declared 1984 the Year of the Yuppie, following the publication of The Yuppie Handbook and the presidential campaign of Gary Hart—a New Aggy candidate who looked as if he carried a dog-eared copy of the tome around in his breast pocket. A few months later, Adweek quoted executives from the major television networks saying their goal in coming years would be to “chase yuppies with a vengeance”—a prediction that came true, according to Rolling Stone’s 1987 report on a series of hit shows that the magazine called Yuppievision. By 1988, a suited Michael J. Fox eating sushi was on the cover of an Esquire magazine issue devoted entirely to “Yupper Clasmen.” Fittingly, one of the articles noted a poll showing that 60 percent of Americans could identify the word yuppie—almost twice the number that could identify the nation’s secretary of state.

While yuppie certainly evoked supermodern feelings in the 1980s, the concept was etymologically rooted in a politicized past. The word made its public debut in a 1973 newspaper column about Jerry Rubin, the leader of the Youth International Party (yuppies) who had abandoned his sixties radicalism for the 1980s world of business. He was a member of the “vanguard of the baby-boom generation,” which had “march[ed] through the ’60s” but was now “advancing on the 1980s in the back seat of a limousine,” as Newsweek put it.

University of Pittsburgh cultural-studies scholar Jane Feuer says that through precisely this historiography, yuppy lore spurred a national “self distancing” from the sixties by justifying “the former flower children laughing at their own [80s] materialism.”

The mythology pervaded the national media. For instance, in

its obsessive coverage of the Baby Boomers’ evolution, a 1986 article in Time seeded its prose with asides about a “dogmatic” and overly “headstrong” sixties “generation that has made a pastime out of prolonged adolescence” but is now facing “up to the responsibilities of adulthood.” Likewise, Newsweek in 1988 berated a “failed” sixties that proved “the more things change, the more they remain the same” and cheered on eighties hyperconsumerism and conservatism.

That metastasized into hit-you-over-the-head television such as the Family Ties installment called “My Back Pages.” The episode, whose name cheekily recalls a Bob Dylan song, shows Steven reconnecting with a colleague named Matt from their days writing for a left-wing magazine. Matt looks and sounds as if he hasn’t changed his hippie wardrobe or belief system since Woodstock. Following Alex’s obligatory insults (“Every time one of these ex-hippies comes prancing in from yesteryear, we gotta get out the love beads, put on the ponchos, and pretend we care about people”), Steven goes to work with Matt on reviving the publication, only to have Matt yell at him for writing a “reactionary” article daring to “suggest people actually go out and vote for one of the two prevailing parties.”

Steven responds with a slogan of yuppy apologium: “Things aren’t as black-and-white as they used to be.”

That line could have been the subtitle for thirtysomething—an eighties program so intent on preaching the yuppy gospel that it licensed a consumer catalog to showcase its yuppy characters’ chic clothing. thirtysomething centered around Michael, a hippie turned ad executive, and his grown-up frat-house friends, as they reminisced about—and chuckled at—their long-haired sixties antics. By the time thirtysomething was airing, this sixties-ridiculing tripe had become such a reliable comedic formula that the show’s writers insisted on flashing characters back to cartoonish sixties memories, even though by the show’s own chronology they would have been too young to be in those settings in the actual 1960s.

Of course, many believe yuppy historiography was originally distilled into its purest form in The Big Chill, one of the highest-grossing movies of 1983. The film, which was a bigger-budget version of John Sayles’s Return of the Secaucus Seven, revolves around a
group of college buddies turned yuppies who reunite at the funeral of Alex, a man who has committed suicide because he couldn't let go of the 1960s and join his friends' yuppified stratosphere.

The reunion participants embody what historian Gil Troy calls "The Great Sellout" of the 1980s—Harold, the college liberal, has corporatized his undergraduate dalliance with radicalism by using the Marxist idiom "Running Dog" as the name of his Wal-Mart-size shoe company; Michael, the idealistic college-newspaper reporter, has become a People-magazine hack; Nick, the psychology major, is a Porsche-driving drug addict; Sam, the activist who once delivered fiery speeches to thousands of fellow students, is now the star of an inane Magnum, P.I. rip-off called J. T. Lanier; Meg, the law student who started out as a public defender because she wanted to defend "Huey and Bobby" (i.e., Black Panther leaders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale), came to view her indigent clients as "scum" and consequently moved to a high-priced corporate law firm.

With sixties rock music playing in the background, the weekend gathering is punctuated by jokes about the group's campus rallies, "marches on Washington," "ideological fanaticism," and belief that "property was a crime." But unlike the eighties pop culture that glorified the fifties, this trip down memory lane wasn't dramatized as a voyage of wistful nostalgia—it was a jaunt into a sixties past that the wizened yuppies came to see as patently ridiculous, as displayed by the movie's climactic dinner scene.

During the meal, Meg, the business lawyer, dares to pine for a feeling of altruism and activism she felt in the sixties. That prompts the shoe company CEO, Harold, to snap, "We were great then and we're shit now? I don't buy that." When he is challenged by his own wife, who says, "I'd hate to think [our past commitment] was all just fashion," she is literally laughed at when he begs the others to "help me with these bleeding hearts!"

The Big Chill's emblematic message was the opposite of a lamentation—it was a fist-pumping endorsement of the sixties' demise, a celebration that depicted the era's goals as unrealistic, its ethos as unserious, its politics as unsuccessful, and therefore its abandonment in favor of eighties conservatism as perfectly responsible.

That yuppie-absolving parable was irresistibly alluring, as it pro-
vided a moral explanation for yippie organizer Jerry Rubin to jump ship for corporate life, SDS activist David Stockman to become Ronald Reagan's archconservative budget director, and millions of other sixties participants to similarly discard their collegiate values for a less utopian adulthood. Indeed, if one scene sums up the yuppies' repudiation of their youth, it is the consolation Karen offers to Sam when he fears his schlocky J. T. Lanier television show "is just garbage" compared to his past activism.

"Not true," she says. "You're entertaining people!"

That's the same debasement of sixties values and aggrandizement of eighties culture photographed on the cover of Esquire's yippie issue, captured in the chic sets of L.A. Law and Miami Vice, and forever memorialized on yippie nostalgia outlets such as Lifetime TV. It is the same snobbery delivered by the thirtysomething suburbanite who joked, "If we can't have the revolution, we might as well have a great breakfast room"; and it is the same consolation Elyse offers Steven when she insists his pursuit of upper-middle-class comforts "are political acts as strong as anything you ever did back at Berkeley."

Yuppie deification in the 1980s provided America with the same "massive rationalization" that the Big Chillers momentarily worried about and then laughed off—the very rationalization that still makes denigrating the sixties seem altogether justified.

Despising the sixties is now as much a part of twenty-first century Americana as South Park. When in the cartoon's renowned "Die, Hippie, Die!" episode Eric Cartman combats those who "smoke pot, wear crap, and smell bad" with a loud recitation of granola-wilting death metal, we laugh with the fat little ball of spite because it is funny to watch the nation's pervasive sixties antipathy be so poignantly satirized.

However hilarious, though, Cartman's taboo humor ridicules an authentic animus—the kind typically delivered today through shrieked euphemisms like "socialist," "tree hugger," or "liberal," from snarling middle-aged white men in Fox News studios or on the steps of Southern state capitals—and these guys rarely have their tongue in their cheek. Yes, "Die, Hippie, Die!" is no laughing matter
for many Americans; it is a deadly serious clarion call anchored in eighties pop culture and—as importantly—eighties politics.

The pitting of the idealized fifties directly against the tarnished sixties and then making that battle America's central political cause started right at the beginning of the 1980s, thanks to events at once calculated, chronological, and coincidental—events that symbolized a monumental changing of the guard.

In the months after the 1980 election, two central figures in sixties folklore were shoved off the American stage: John Lennon, icon of radicals' resistance to authority, was assassinated, and Walter Cronkite, forever associated with Vietnam-era truth-telling, retired from anchoring the CBS Evening News. Months later, Raiders of the Lost Ark and its sixties heroes was packing seats at movie theaters—and, of course, the Reagan Revolution was sweeping the land.

No single force more intensely crystallized these crosscurrents into a cogent fifties-versus-sixties message than this volcanic eruption of anger that equated support for conservative Republicanism with the incineration of the sixties.

The magma of resentment politics that had been simmering underground since the late 1970s exploded during the stretch run of the 1980 presidential campaign. In August of that year, Reagan channeled white rage at the civil rights movement by endorsing the racist euphemism states rights, an endorsement that came during a speech to a Confederate-flag-waving audience in the same Mississippi town where three civil rights workers had been murdered by the Ku Klux Klan. Days later, he lashed out at opponents of the Vietnam conflict, saying the invasion was a “noble cause” and suggesting that war critics made America “afraid to let [U.S. soldiers] win.” Then in October, Reagan pitted the social conservatism of The Fifties against the secular progressivism of The Sixties by telling the National Religious Broadcasters’ convention, “I don't think we should have ever expelled God from the classroom.”

“These [were] implicit attacks on three of the most salient political incursions in the Sixties—the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, and the Warren Court's invalidation of traditional political and social practices,” says historian Daniel Marcus.

Not surprisingly, Reagan built his two terms around a nonironic version of the “Die, Hippie, Die!” rallying cry that Eric Cartman later poked fun at. On Capitol Hill, Reagan bashed “welfare queens” and affirmative action while pushing bills to gut the Great Society and War on Poverty programs of the sixties. On the international stage, the veteran Cold Warrior channeled his forty-year legacy of anti-communist histrionics into an arms race with the Soviets and into covert military operations against leftists in Latin America. And on hot-button social and regional issues, Reagan's administration went out of its way to wage high-profile campaigns that inherently lampooned hippies.

In the schools, First Lady Nancy Reagan's Just Say No crusade indicted sixties drug culture. Out west, Interior Secretary James Watt framed his assault on environmental regulations as a fifties-versus-sixties war to “restore America's greatness” against a green movement that he called “a left-wing cult” plotting “to bring down the government.” At GOP rallies, it was all red meat: Republicans were fighting The Sixties freaks who “blame America first,” as Reagan's United Nations Ambassador Jean Kirkpatrick bellowed at the 1984 Republican National Convention.

Reagan's followers made sure to put all of this sixties bashing within a back-to-the-future narrative of fifties restoration. Speaking to a 1980s gathering of the Heritage Foundation—a conservative think tank whose very name references midcentury sentimentality—a minister said, “We're here to turn the clock back to 1954 in this country.” Similarly, right-wing columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak said Reagan revolutionaries were trying to “return the republic to the status quo of an earlier day [that] might be fixed at 1955”—the exact year Marty McFly famously revisited.

Democrats for the most part had no idea how to respond. Walter Mondale's 1984 campaign, for instance, aired an ad that walked into the sixties stereotype by playing Crosby, Stills, and Nash's hippie anthem “Teach Your Children”—as if to say, yes, a vote for Mondale is a vote for the counterculture. Other Democratic presidential candidates such as Hart, John Glenn, and Jesse Jackson tried to lash themselves to the positive legacies of the sixties, only to get eviscerated by its negatives.

By the time Reagan was leaving office, this fifties-glorying jihad
But the sixties hadn’t just become one front in scorched-earth
campaigns—it had become the raison d’etre of American
politics itself.

As Newsweek noted in its 1988 cover story on the “Sixties Complex,”
“Gary Hart lost his chance to be president when his admiration
for the ’60s style of Jack Kennedy led him to Bimini with Donna
[and] Douglas Ginsburg’s Supreme Court prospects went down
when someone remembered his youthful experiments
with hash.” Meanwhile, Republican vice-presidential nominee Dan
Quayle was a “fraternity man in the heyday of SDS, a Goldwaterite
in the year of LBJ,” a hippie-hating square who “smoked no dope
and dropped no acid”—a draft-dodger who was “catalyzing” a
revival of the ’60s in the middle of a presidential race.

This “sixties complex,” which should have been a sideshow in
the wake of 1988’s oncoming recession and imminent Soviet collapse,
quickly became the main event as George H. W. Bush’s post-Reagan
campaign incited a further generational tit-for-tat.

At their party’s national convention, Republicans aired a Bush
speech that intertwined images of Bush’s fifties heritage, sixties riots,
and supposed unity and prosperity of the Reagan years. That was
touched off by Bush’s acceptance speech. Standing before the nation,
the Little League scion, Kennebunkport aristocrat and son of a U.S.
hero boldly presented his life as an up-by-the-bootstraps success
allegedly typical of the “old-fashioned common sense” of The
Fifties.

“We moved from a shotgun house, to a duplex apartment, to a
bungalow, and lived the dream,” he said. “High school football on Friday
night, Little League, neighborhood barbecue. People don’t see their
experience as symbolic of an era—but of course we were.”

From there, it was on to slandering Massachusetts Governor
Michael Dukakis—a genuine first-generation, up-by-the-bootstraps
success story—as a sixties radical. Early on, Republicans ac-
centuated the Democratic presidential nominee’s wife, Kitty, of burning
antigovernment rallies during the Vietnam conflict. Forced to
tend to the baseless charges in the same demeaning language of
national warfare, she asserted that far from being a hippie in the
sixties, she was actually carrying the torch of The Fifties™ by “having
babies and raising a family.”

Empoldened, the GOP moved to successfully portray the historical
symbol of red-white-and-blue patriotism as a seditious rogue
state. Massachusetts, once venerated as the colonial cradle of the
nation and populated mostly by working-class fifties archetypes à la
Archie Bunker—this same place was reimagined by the GOP as
Haight-Ashbury circa 1967 through a campaign that slandered
Boston, Cambridge, Harvard University, and by extension Dukakis as
“elitist” and unpatriotic.

Most remember the last weeks of the 1988 campaign as the moment
when Bush’s team reached back to the anti-civil-rights backlash
of sixties-versus-sixties politics with the famed Willie Horton ads. But
that was only part of it. While making his television attack campaign
the political equivalent of a blaxploitation film, Bush was also touring
the country promoting his fifties heritage—specifically, his World
War II service and what he called his “Norman Rockwell vision of
America, the vision of kids and dogs and apple pie and flags on
parade.”

Bush’s astounding come-from-behind victory, built on sixties-versus-sixties attacks, subsequently turned intergenerational low blows
into the most oft-used moves in politics’ Cobra Kai dojo. To truly
destroy an opponent, you sweep the leg by tying him to the sixties.

This was the go-to cheap shot of the election that capped off the
1980s as a political era—the 1992 battle between Bush and Bill
Clinton. Before most Americans knew anything about the Democrat’s
policy positions, his experience, or even his womanizing, the sixties-
obsessed Republican Party made sure people knew that he had called
the military draft “illegitimate,” worked for George McGovern’s
1972 campaign, organized a protest march against the Vietnam War
during his Rhodes Scholarship days in England, and once smoked
weed but “did not inhale” (a line that “made it into the national
conversation overnight,” as ABC’s Peter Jennings chuckled at the time).

By the time Clinton stumbled into the general election, Saturday
Night Live was, quite literally, satirizing him as a tie-dyed hippie—a
depiction Republicans tried to capitalize on.

In what may be history’s most succinct and pure example of the
"Die, Hippie, Die!" ethos, Dan Quayle’s wife, Marilyn, delivered a headline-grabbing speech at the 1992 Republican National Convention, saying, “Not everyone joined the sexual revolution or dodged the draft... Not everyone concluded that American society was so bad that it had to be radically remade by social revolution... Not everyone joined the counterculture.”

This didn’t stop with Clinton’s victory, partly because Clinton joined the fifties-versus-sixties war himself. Though grassroots activists were hoping Clinton would “go in there and redeem the sixties generation,” as one 1992 Democratic volunteer was quoted in Rolling Stone as saying, Clinton did the opposite with his triangulating politics, deregulatory agenda, declarations that “the era of Big Government is over,” and insistence that we’re “ending welfare as we know it.”

Two years after his election, those same sixties-rebutting themes were picked up by soon-to-be Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, who started telling audiences that the Democrats had become a party of “traitors,” “total bizarreness, total weirdness,” “countercultural McGovernicks,” and, therefore, the “enemy of normal Americans.”

In 1996, it was Bob Dole, the World War II veteran from Kansas—thanks to The Wizard of Oz the geographic location most associated with prefab fantasies of fifties Americana—promising to “be the bridge to an America that only the unknowing call myth.” In 2000, it was George W. Bush’s campaign “to restore honor and dignity” to an America that supposedly had it taken away by Al Gore and his pot-smoking, Earth Day-loving sixties youth. And through it all conservative activists were steadily beating the generational drum—from Christian conservative leader Gary Bauer saying his movement was advocating “not a single public-policy goal [that] was not understood as necessary for a healthy society when Eisenhower was president,” to conservative scholar Charles Murray saying America should be restored to “as it was in 1960.”

Then came 2004—a contest many thought would, if not end the eighties death match between the fifties and sixties, then at least turn the tables on it. In those post-9/11 days of hypermilitarism, John Kerry, who spent the sixties getting shrapnel fired into his ass in Vietnam, was running against Bush, who spent the sixties partying at home in the Alabama National Guard. Yet, the Democrat was the war hero and the Republican was the guy who had lived the 1980s caricature of the sixties’ countercultural lifestyle.

Yet, the television airwaves teemed with a doctored photo of Kerry at a sixties antiwar rally with Hanoi Jane Fonda, then with allegations that he threw his military medals at the U.S. Capitol, and then, finally, with clips of a long-haired Kerry testifying against the Vietnam War at a congressional hearing.

“It’s never stopped being 1968,” said one senior Bush adviser summing up the whole assault.

In short, Kerry became the 1980s cartoon of the sixties, and that was that.

With politics and popular culture becoming one and the same in the 1980s, the “Die, Hippie, Die!” crusade of the electoral arena was simultaneously amplified in entertainment.

During the mid-1980s, Pat Robertson’s Family Channel joined Nick at Nite in the cable lineup, bookending its religious and political shows with black-and-white reruns from The Fifties. In 1990, there was Madonna’s craving The Fifties vogue and its penchant for giving “good face.” In 1994, it was Forrest Gump parables about The Fifties™ guy who never changes his fifties ways, being heartbroken by the hippie whose involvement in The Sixties™ results in drug abuse, venereal disease, and tragic death. In the late 1990s, it was Swingin and Big Bad Voo Doo Daddy resurrecting fifties bowling-shirt loungewear and big-band swing music—and now it’s Mad Men making fifties narrow suits and thin ties cool again. And, of course, it’s Saving Private Ryan, the Band of Brothers miniseries, Castle Wolfenstein video games, and all of the products that formed what Temple professor Carolyn Kitch calls today’s “full-blown World War II nostalgia industry”—an industry whose promotion of the “good war” is used to counter bad memories of Vietnam and its sixties discontents.*

That last phenomenon exemplifies how so many of these trends,

*Writing in In These Times in 2006, journalist Christopher Hayes examined this World War II nostalgia industry in detail, noting its breathtaking scope. Among
their subjective opinions and their generational politics, made the
jump from entertainment to news media—and blurred the
distinction between the two. Recall that NBC News anchor Tom
Brokaw hit paydirt in recent years by recasting himself as the planet's
leading fifties auteur with a book he called The Greatest Generation. By
definition, this now omnipotent superlative assumes a fifties genera-
tion that is greater than the others that followed—greater because, as
Brokaw asserts, The Fifties generation exhibits “a strong sense of
loyalty and service, modesty and achievement,” which its offspring
were distanced from... during the sixties.”

Now today, the 1980s has all but guaranteed that any remaining
positive attributes of the sixties are kept alive—if at all—via trivialized
movies about Woodstock, hippie Halloween costumes, Phish shows,
the Gap's 1969 jeans line, and Ben & Jerry's ice cream. As a real po-
titical movement, sixties ardor was commodified—and therefore
slutted—in the 1980s by spectacles such as We Are The World, Hands
Across America, and Live Aid. These became today’s Katrina tele-
thon, Farm Aid concerts, and euphoric election rallies—causes and
events that portray grassroots activism merely as momentary bursts of
celebrity-driven entertainment and engagement. And in 2008, that’s
exactly what the Obama campaign understood so well.

Republicans that year were doing what they've been doing since
the 1980s. Their convention’s relentless harping on Obama's back-
ground as a San Francisco “community organizer” tried to tie him to six-
ties radical Saul Alinsky, label his church a radical institution, portray
him as a black nationalist, and lash Obama to Bill Ayers of the
Weather Underground. It was all part of a multifaceted effort to
make the country see the candidate and his wife as Black Panthers from
the sixties. And the GOP’s campaign to label him a foreign-born,
madrasa-trained Muslim was a way to question Obama's American-
ness in a post-9/11 world, in the same way conservatives have been
questioning liberals' patriotism since the sixties.*

For its part, the media amplified The Sixties whenever it could.
In the lead-up to the Democratic National Convention in Denver,
reporters showered a tiny protest group called Re-create '68 with
undue attention. In a typical dispatch a full six months before the
convention, Politico published a breathless story about event organi-
zers “wrest[ling] with 1968” because Americans “are loath to revisit
what they see as a disastrous time for both the anti-war movement
and the Democratic Party.”

A month later, the Guardian in the UK headlined its own story
“Echoes of 1968 Return to Haunt the Divided Democrats,” noting
that two documentary films (The Chicago 10 and The Great Chicago
Conspiracy Circus) had just been released, and that West Wing creator
Aaron Sorkin was working on a movie about Abbie Hoffman. By
summer, the din had gotten so loud, The New Yorker published a cover
showing Michelle Obama as Angela Davis and Barack Obama as a
terrorist, lampooning a country fixated on trying to turn anything
and everything into a vaudeville of sixties malevolence.

Obama saw the spectacle in front of him, and rather than muddle
through a generational war that had been going on since the 1980s,
he circumvented the battlefield entirely, repeatedly telling Americans
he had no connection at all to the fight.

Obama’s campaign stressed his Establishment credentials—his Ivy
League résumé and his time in the Illinois legislature—before it ever
talked about his brief stint as a community organizer. Obama fled
from Jeremiah Wright, Jesse Jackson, and any other black leader who
had roots in the sixties or sixties-esque politics. Of the Ayres con-
nection, he reminded reporters that the radical “did something that I de-

*Just look at the trajectory of this political tactic: Reagan implicitly questioned
sixties liberals’ loyalty to country in 1983 by saying they want to “place the United
States in a position of military and moral inferiority.” Republican Party chairman
Rich Bond opened his party’s 1992 convention by saying, “We are America, these
other people are not America.” John McCain in 2008 aired a television ad calling
himself “an American president Americans have been waiting for”—the message
being that Obama wasn't just un-American in his liberal beliefs, but actually not an
American.
forty years ago when I was six or seven years old”—the message that he was way too young to even remember the sixties. Most prominently, he packaged his campaign as a cause of transcendence that could finally end all the sixties-obsessed strife that had been realities since the 1980s.

At the same time, though, Obama harnessed the surviving tatters of activist sixties by using his media superstardom to turn his campaign into a presidential campaign version of Live Aid—big crowds, excitement, and kinda sorta that vague feeling of something not entirely Woodstock-y. Through social-networking sites, blogs, podcasts, posters, and appearances on entertainment television shows, he did transcend—he transcended not so much generation, but becoming a powerful mass cultural brand.*

This wasn’t merely Bill Clinton and the saxophone—this was a candidate so omnipresent in so many spheres that many Americans win by a Shepard Fairey poster that didn’t even have the candidate on it.

The brilliance was in the marketing. Unlike past Democrats, who were impossible to to tie themselves to sixties policies (Medicare, women’s rights) while distancing (riots, busing, etc.) from the 1980s image of The Sixties™, Obama conjured that sixties energy by shunning ideology and creating a pastiche “movement” that was unthreateningly fashionable, consumerist, and safe. His campaign wasn’t Woodstock, it was a Woodstock revue—glitzy, exciting, and reminiscent, but maintaining the security, order, and clean bathrooms of a corporateshopping casino—and none of the danger, dirt, or commitment of old. As Obama himself said while planning his run, he knew he needed his “fifteen minutes of fame” to be “a stand-in for that decade for many of the gauzy glory and excitement of sixties activism without the hard-edged stands and intimidating repercussions that actually came with genuine engagement.

To be part of the Obama “movement,” the campaign didn’t ask you to demonstrate or stage sit-ins or mount constant pressure for the passage of legislation—you could show up with fifteen thousand other people to hear the candidate speak and then go home. To waft that sweet smell of sixties communalism without the era’s corresponding commitment, you could don an Obama T-shirt, forward an Obama email, or post an Obama image on your Facebook page—and not have to think of yourself as the awful hippie you learned to hate in the eighties.

“Obama won office by capitalizing on our profound nostalgia [for] social movements [but he] decisively parted ways with [those] movements from which he has borrowed so much,” wrote cultural critic Naomi Klein, noting that Obama specifically employed sixties imagery—“Pop Art posters from Che, his cadence from King, his Yes We Can! slogan from the migrant farmworkers’ Si, Se Puede!”

Now, during the Obama presidency, the Tea Party opposition is an exact analogue to the Reagan vanguard, all the way down to the latter-day roots of its very name—in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the New York Times labeled what were then the first contemporary antigovernment/antitax revolts “modern Boston Tea Parties.” Not surprisingly, the goal of today’s Tea Party protesters is a return to the politics of the fifties—worshiping, sixties-bashing 1980s.

Tea Party protesters and their leaders in the conservative movement acknowledge this intrinsically in their choice of language and extrinsically in their most unfiltered declarations. For example, an essay posted on the website of FreedomWorks, the organization that sponsors Tea Party demonstrations, says protesters are enraged by “the sense that the country that they grew up in is slipping away right before their eyes.”

House Republican leader John Boehner (R-OH) says today’s Tea Party rallies are organized by people who are saying “wait a minute, this is not where we’re going, my kids and grandkids are going to grow up in a different country than I grew up in.” It’s a line that went from his lips to the rank and file’s mouth, as local media filled up with quotes like

* In 2008, Obama was actually named Brand of the Year by Advertising Age in 2008. In its winning the award, the magazine specifically highlighted his brand’s transparency, noting it was “big enough to be anything to anyone yet had an intimate feel to inspire advocacy. . . . Mr. Obama somehow managed to be 21st Century Honest and Honest Tea, both the megabrand with the global awareness and an instant network and the dark-horse, upset nicher player.”
LIKING IKE, HATING WOODSTOCK

They're here to keep America the way it was when we grew up."

Glenn Beck, the Tea Party's media front general, says it is about "real outrage from real people who just want their country back." He's very clear that "back" means before The Sixties™. In one recent diatribe, Beck praised Joe McCarthy for "shin[ing] the spotlight on the Communist Party" in the 1950s. In another, he insisted "fifty years ago people felt happier" than they do today because today we have less God," prompting his guest to agree by saying, "Something happened in the 1950s where everything went down... that's when they started taking God"—"they" being the hippies. "God" presumably being a reference to mid-twentieth-century courts barring prayer in school.

This kind of nostalgia now slashes its way through today's politics and policy debates, and its lack of connection to specific issues betrays a simplistic, crafted anchor in intergenerational conflict.

"This is nothing at all to do with health care," said Tea Party leader Mark Williams in a CNN interview. "It's about this nation deviating from, or this government more accurately, deviating from this nation's legacy."

"Things we had in the fifties were better," another Tea Party leader told The New York Times.

"What we want is to get back to where our country was one hundred years ago," said an Oklahoma Tea Party leader on CNN.

It's kind of a time for another Eisenhower," Bob Dole told 60 Minutes in a discussion about 2012 presidential candidates. The language—"back," "real people," "deviating from," "slippaway," "the way it was," "different country than I grew up in," "policy," "better time"—underscores the fierce yearning for a fantasy-authenticity and conformity of old-time fifties America, sans real-world downsides like lynching, religious bigotry, burning crosses, chauvinism, union-busting, and smokestack pollution that defined the mid-twentieth century. Whether or not Tea Party leaders specifically pointing to the actual 1950s is less important than that broader movement is advocating that bigger, 1980s-manufactured except of The Fifties™.

The tragedy, of course, is the elimination of the kind of moder-
That same week, influential Democratic politicians made headlines echoing the same argument. In a story headlined “Centrist Democrats Take on Left over Iraq,” Politico reported that leading lawmakers warned the supposedly all-powerful hippies that they would risk losing the presidency “if they present a face to the public that is too angry in tone” in opposing the war.

The volleys and countervolleys exposed what, on the merits, should be unimaginable oxymorons. To continue a perpetual backlash, conservatives since the 1980s have developed a vested interest in preserving the memory of a 1960s that was, in reality, the historic apex of progressive achievement. At the same time, progressives now flee from that era as if it were their dark ages. Even more absurd, the right, through the Tea Party movement, now uses the very sixties protest tactics that ended the fifties to make its case for ending The Sixties and bringing back The Fifties—for fear of a new sixties they believe is on the horizon.

“As a veteran of the political and cultural wars of the Sixties,” wrote Norman Podhoretz, “I knew from my own scars that no matter how small and insignificant a group the anti-Americans of the left might for the moment look to the naked eye, they had it in them to rise and grow again.”

As an author and magazine editor, Podhoretz grew into a Mt. Rushmore-size political icon in those early years of the 1980s when the fifties-versus-sixties war for the American memory was just beginning. Yet, that quote is not from one of his Reagan-era manifestos, but from an article he published in the 2007 Wall Street Journal—an article that came a year after CNN’s election website asked, “What Would Alex P. Keaton Do?” and two years after Eric Cartman warned that if South Park doesn’t “do something fast” about the hippies, it will be “the end of all life as we know it.”

In that way, Podhoretz’s eighties-infused rhetoric of generational combat was as up-to-date and as culturally resonant as the latest iPhone commercial.

And that is the problem.
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