

# A Veteran of the Chicago Protests of '68 Talks of Lessons for Today

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Chicago Police attempt to disperse demonstrators outside the Conrad Hilton, Democratic National Convention headquarters, Aug. 29, 1968, in Chicago. (AP Photo/Michael Boyer, File)

CHICAGO — “This is the spot,” Jack Porter said.

Standing on the sun drenched corner, the sociologist and esteemed scholar pointed toward the street signs protruding from a nearby light pole.

East Balboa Street and South Michigan Avenue, they said.

“This is where we were tear-gassed during the police riot,” he said.

“Luckily, I wasn’t beaten up because I snuck into the hallway here,” Porter continued, nodding toward the Hilton Hotel, which spans the block from Balboa to East 8th Street.

Now almost 80, Porter has worn a number of impressive hats in the decades since the now infamous 1968 Democratic National Convention.

Currently, a research associate at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University, where he conducts research on Israeli-Russian relations, Porter is a former assistant professor of social science at Boston University and a former research associate at Harvard's Ukrainian Research Institute.

He also served as both treasurer and vice president of the International Association of Genocide Scholars, and he's well-known as a human rights and social activist.

Back in 1968, the Milwaukee native had a much lower, if growing, profile as an active leader in the moderate wing of Students for a Democratic Society, the national student activist organization.

"It was the stupidest thing," he said of then-Mayor Richard J. Daley's decision to unleash the full weight of law enforcement on the protestors who arrived in the city for the Democratic convention.

Though there were some natural provocateurs in the massive crowd, including Yippie leaders Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, the vast majority of attendees merely wanted to loudly voice their opposition to the Vietnam War, catch a few free concerts by the likes of Peter, Paul and Mary and Phil Ochs, and go home.

To Daley, however, any large-scale protest on his city's streets was a personal affront that imperiled his intention to showcase Chicago on a national stage.

"No thousands will come to our city and take over our streets, our city, our convention," he declared.

When an estimated  
10,000  
demonstrators did  
show up they were  
met by an army  
composed of more  
than 23,000 police  
and National  
Guardsmen.

The Chicago Hilton Hotel. (Photo by Dan

McCue)  
“If they had said,  
‘Listen, you can  
march back and forth  
in Union Park’ or otherwise be allowed a more contained protest,  
people might not be talking about 1968 in Chicago all these years  
later,” Porter said.

“Instead, they were absolutely determined to stop us,” he added.

Porter recalled that the chaos began in Lincoln Park, several  
blocks from the Hilton, where thousands of young people had  
gathered for a concert and to hear speeches by the likes of author  
Norman Mailer and poet Allen Ginsberg.

“I was on the stage with them, and from that vantage point I  
could see the police massing on the perimeter of the gathering,  
waiting. For what reason, I did not know,” he said.

“At this point, we were just simply, you know, listening to the  
speakers, which also included SDS leaders Tom Hayden and  
Rennie Davis — both of whom were concerned there could be  
violence, but who nevertheless wanted to keep the protests  
peaceful,” Porter said.

“Well, the police got upset about something, I have no idea what, and they waded in and started pummeling people. It was horrible. And the more they pummeled people, the more the crowd began to move from park to park, eventually winding up in Grant Park, right across the street from where we are standing,” he said.

The goal, as much as a large crowd can be said to have a single goal, was to reach the Democratic National Convention site: the now-demolished International Amphitheatre, which was located another several blocks south and west of Hilton, at Halsted and 42nd Streets, near the old Chicago stockyards.

“I don’t know how I had the energy to walk all that way, but you know, it’s a lot easier to consider when you’re 24,” Porter laughed. “And, of course, we didn’t have any Ubers to take.”

Grant Park, Chicago today. (Photo by Dan McCue)

“In any event, the police had roused us out of Lincoln Park and we ended up here. There were protesters in the park across the street. There were protesters in the street. And we wouldn’t leave,” he continued. “So the police attacked us, right here in front of the Hilton and the other hotels you see along the park.

“It was a poor move because this is where the delegates were staying, and television cameras soon descended on the scene,” he said.

“So this is literally where the protesters began chanting ‘The whole world is watching’?” Porter was asked.

“That’s right,” he said. “Because they were being beaten up in real time on live TV.”

In fact, by nightfall, televisions inside the convention hall were televising the police beating and clubbing of demonstrators on the street.

“It was just a terrible scene. I saw people being carried off on stretchers, in wheelchairs. Terrible,” Porter said.

On the convention floor, Sen. Abraham Ribicoff, D-Conn., rose to nominate Sen. George McGovern, D-S.D., and took a jab at Daley in the process, saying that with George McGovern in the White House, “we wouldn’t have Gestapo tactics on the streets of Chicago.”

“Is there any rule under which Mayor Daley can be compelled to suspend the police state terror being perpetrated at this minute on kids in front of the Conrad Hilton [hotel]?” Ribicoff asked.

Daley rose from his seat and hurled a string of profanity and invective in Ribicoff’s direction.

Eventually, a group that included Daley’s bodyguards and a number of city officials hustled Ribicoff away from the podium.

“It was a tremendously intense

(Photo by Dan McCue)

time in America,” Porter said. You have to remember, only months earlier, Dr. Martin Luther King had been killed. Weeks earlier, Sen. Robert F. Kennedy had been killed. After King died 80 cities were burned.

“And rather than try to soothe the anger in the air, or even understand it, Daley issued this stupid order, basically directing the police to shoot to kill if they saw fit. They had orders from the top to do whatever they wanted. ‘If they [the protestors] get out of line, shoot to maim ... even if they’re just protesting.’”

Porter said once people learn of his involvement in the events of 1968 in Chicago they often ask him how that period compares with today.

“It was much worse back then,” he said.

“I mean beyond what I’ve already mentioned, if you look at the 1960s as a whole, we had other civil rights leaders killed, like Malcolm X, and of course, we witnessed the assassination of a sitting president, John F. Kennedy,” Porter continued.

“And being [involved in SDS], I felt I was going to die too, that I would get shot. And you have to remember, prior to 1968, police were not as well trained as they are today,” he said.

“After the police riot they had these commissions, and I was a contributor to that process,” Porter said. “Basically, Chicago was a wake up call, and after it there was an acknowledgement that police needed to be better trained on how to engage protests and the people that participate in them.

“So they said, ‘Who should we call?’ ‘Oh, let’s call in the sociologists, people like Morris Janowitz and even Jack Porter,’” he said. “I taught the first course in protest engagement to Black policemen at DePaul University, here in Chicago.

“But as a result of the efforts that occurred in the wake of Chicago 1968, police are much better trained and as a rule what we’ve seen is a lot less harm done to either side, police or the demonstrators,” he added.

At the same time, Porter said for all the chaos that ensued, “things were simpler” in 1968.

“Why? Because there was really only one issue that everyone coelected around — Vietnam. Today, it’s much more diverse. I mean, you have your pro- and anti-abortion people. You have your marijuana people. And suddenly, there’s the Israel/Palestine issue, which has really complicated things,” he said.

Porter went on to note that while the protestors of the late 1960s were directly impacted by the threat posed by the war in Vietnam, those leading the protests today are not similarly impacted by the war in Gaza.

Another landmark in Grant Park. (Photo by Dan McCue)

“So, if you look at the current situation, you might ask, ‘Why are they protesting in this kind of revolutionary way?’ Well, it’s because the protests are not really being led by Palestinians, they’re being led by radicals who call themselves revolutionary communists.

“I mean, they make no bones that these demonstrations are really about the overthrow of capitalism, right? They only use the

Palestinian issues as an excuse,” he said. “Of course, there were extreme radicals around in the Vietnam era as well, but back then, the extreme radicals, the communists and Troskyists were not in control of what was going on; it was SDS and Tom Hayden and Rennie Davis, more moderate social Democrats, who were at the forefront of the protests then.”

Porter said as a teacher — and a self-described “progressive Zionist” — he tries to use the lessons of Chicago in 1968 to unravel the complicated nature of the United States’ relationship with Israel and the current war in Gaza.

“Sometimes they’re listening, but mostly not,” he said. “They don’t listen to the nuances.”

“No, they want revolution, and it’s not “Revolution For The Hell of It” [the title of a book by the late Yippie leader Abbie Hoffman]. It’s not Yippie. It’s not a fun thing.”

Instead, he said the protests are essentially a loose gathering of different groups with various left-wing grievances who want to foment a “serious revolution overthrowing capitalism in America.

“Of course, it’s never going to succeed, and thank God it’s never going to succeed,” he said.

“Yes, Israel has made mistakes, there’s no denying that, but overthrowing capitalism is not going to solve that issue,” he added.

As it happened, Porter was in the audience of the Stephen Colbert show in Chicago when former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., was momentarily shouted down by individuals protesting the United States’ policy regarding the war in Gaza.



“Personally, I think Pelosi responded quite well, and she said something I’ve also heard [House Democratic Leader] Hakeem Jeffries say, which is ‘Stop the bombing. Let the hostages go. And let’s build a two-state solution.’

“The radicals, of course, think this is all a little bit too late, but I think it’s important that people like Pelosi keep pushing for a two-state solution without seeking any forgiveness and without any shame,” he said.

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