

50 YEARS AGO, WE STARTED DOWN THE ROAD TO WHERE WE ARE NOW

By Ron Sirak • @ronsirak

December 28, 2017



In June, the Neshannock High School class of 1968 marks the 50th anniversary of our graduation and of one of the nation's pivotal years. In August of that year, after months of watching tumultuous events unfold, I traveled the farthest from home I'd ever been—the 286 miles from New Castle, Pa., to Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pa. I was ready for change. The United States was ready for change.

Actually, we were living in Girard, Pa., when Mom and Aunt Izzy drove me to Lancaster, but my point of reference is always New Castle. We had moved 85 miles to Mom's hometown the morning after graduation – the morning after Bobby Kennedy was killed. That Kennedy died the night I graduated high school – we got the news about 3 a.m. at an all-night dinner dance – summed up the impact 1968 had on me. Bobby was my guy.

The 24-hour news cycle we now live in has immunized us against news by making the slug “Breaking News” a

meaningless attachment to any small development that lingers on the screen long after it is “news.” And too often broadcast media can’t handle more than one story at a time, suffering a journalistic attention deficit disorder that chases the latest bright, shiny object.

The events in 1968 would have blown up the Internet and crippled the news networks.

Consider this:

Jan. 23, North Korea captured the surveillance ship USS Pueblo, triggering an 11-month standoff. Jan. 30, the Tet Offensive exposed the lie that the United States was winning the Vietnam War. March 12, Sen. Eugene McCarthy got 42.2 percent of the vote in the New Hampshire Democratic primary to 49.8 percent for President Lyndon Johnson. March 31, Johnson said, “I shall not seek and will not accept” re-nomination.

April 4, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis. April 30, New York City police used tear gas to end building takeovers by students at Columbia University. May 2, student riots brought Paris to a halt. June 5, Sen. Bobby Kennedy won the California primary and likely the

Democratic nomination but was killed shortly after his victory speech.

Aug. 20, the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia. Aug. 26-29 protesters clashed with police outside the Democratic convention in Chicago as it nominated Sen. Hubert Humphrey to run against Richard Nixon. Inside the convention, several Southern states had credential fights; TV reporters Dan Rather, Mike Wallace and Edwin Newman were roughed up by security guards and Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley shouted anti-Semitic obscenities at Sen. Abraham Ribicoff as he spoke from the podium.

Oct. 16, American sprinters John Carlos and Tommie Smith raised fists in the black power salute at an Olympic medal ceremony. Nov. 5, Nixon was elected with 301 electoral votes to 191 for Humphrey and 46 for Alabama Gov. George Wallace, who carried five Confederate states.

At a time when tens of thousands of young people were dying in Vietnam – mostly working people and the poor since the rich could always find a bone spur deferment – and when some made whites feel victimized by the fight for equality by blacks, Nixon exploited those class and racial divides. It was colonial-era divide-and-conquer and it worked. Does any of this sound familiar?

Dissenting ideas were not only opposed but also attacked, sometimes physically. Those against the Vietnam War were painted as against America. Those wanting equal rights for blacks were portrayed as being against whites. Veterans and GIs were vilified for decisions made by civilian leaders – by politicians.

One misconception is that all young people of that era were hippies or rebels. In fact, a fraction protested Vietnam; marched for civil rights for minorities and women and gays; pushed for true democracy. But that minority moved the nation toward embracing diversity. Progress is always a minority movement.

It was the Constitution that saved America. A free and unfettered press published the Pentagon Papers and probed Watergate. An independent judicial system supported civil rights for all and limited the imperial power of the president. Demonstrators exercised freedom of assembly and speech. Eventually, Congress found the moral courage to act. At a crucial time, key American institutions worked the way the Founding Fathers imagined.

The filmmaker Steven Spielberg said: “History is its own reminder of how bad things can get.” To know history is to

know the fragility of freedom. If people had not fought back, McCarthyism would have won; the segregationists would have won; there would be no child labor laws, no workplace safety standards, no protections for the elderly or the disabled, weaker standards for food and auto safety.

The chaos of 1968 is a reminder of how good and how bad we can be. It reminds us ultimate power is with the people. It reminds us real change comes from the bottom up, not the top down. That's always been true. Does the law change if Rosa Parks doesn't refuse to sit in the back of the bus?

The chaos of 1968 is also a grim reminder of how closely beneath the surface violence lurks. We saw that at Charlottesville a few months ago. And the chaos of 1968 reminds us of how important it is to listen to each other and respect differing opinions. We see that abused all the time with the name-calling on Twitter.

The chaos of 1968 reminded us our freedoms are like muscles; if not exercised they atrophy. The chaos of 1968 reminds us the true greatness of our nation is best measured during bad times, not good. That's when we find out who we really are. Perhaps that's a lesson of 1968 that's important to remember right now.

“These are the times that try men's souls,” Thomas Paine said in 1776. “The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.”

We've had many times that try men's souls and 1968 was one. Now appears to be another. We survived before by exercising the rights spelled out in the Constitution. The enduring lesson of 1968 is that freedom is a good thing, something worth fighting for. Fifty years on, I believe that more than ever; 50 years on I cherish that more than ever.