

# Old ways just didn't cut it any more

**Matt Alderton** Special to USA TODAY

If tears were a non-renewable resource, Americans in 1968 would have made a troubling dent in their supply. ■ First came the devastating assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis on April 4. There there was the murder of Robert Kennedy, who was fatally shot just moments after winning the California primary on June 5. Meanwhile, more than 16,000 Americans lost their lives in the Vietnam War — more than in any other year during the 20-year conflict. ■ For these and numerous other losses, Americans wept. There was at least one death in 1968, however, that many Americans celebrated: that of the “Establishment.” It was a slaying in which millions of people across the country were enthusiastically complicit.

**“What happened in the late 1960s was a shift from the covert to the overt (rather than a major shift in behavior). ... There was a breakdown in the code of silence around sex.”**

**Gillian Frank**  
historian of sexuality



Women protesting the Miss America pageant dump a marionette into a “freedom trash can” during a demonstration on the Atlantic City boardwalk on Sept. 7, 1968. BEV GRANT, GETTY IMAGES



Frank Kameny, center, and other members of the Mattachine Society of Washington march for gay rights. Founded in Los Angeles in 1950, Mattachine was one of the first gay rights organizations in the USA. KAY TOBIN, NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY.



Robin Morgan, pictured in 1970, helped found New York Radical Women in response to sexism, including among so-called allies in the "Left." ED FORD AP

Activist Mario Savio perfectly captured the ethos of the time in a famous speech at the University of California, Berkeley in 1964. "There's a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious ... that you can't take part," Savio said. "You've got to put your bodies upon the gears ... and you've got to make it stop. And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you are free, the machine will be prevented from working at all."

Four years later, bodies were piled up on those gears thanks to social and cultural U-turns that permanently altered American culture. From symbols of rebellion like marijuana, miniskirts and "free love" to civil-rights movements for women and gays, 1968 upended convention in ways that continue to influence American discourse.

### 'Radical Women' find their voice

In 1968, former child actor Robin Morgan decided she'd had her fill of patriarchy. As a member of the civil rights and antiwar movements, she spent her days speaking up. Yet she still felt silenced. So at 27 years old, she decided once and for all to put the "act" in "activist."

"I was a young woman in what was then called the Left," recalls Morgan, now 77, who recently published her seventh book of poems, *Dark Matter: New Poems*. "I had been very disheartened by the attitudes of the guys there. We thought we were brothers equally, sisters together, going forward to build a new world. But instead we found men who said things like, 'Hey, you gonna give me a little of my civil rights tonight, baby?' We were expected to make coffee, not

policy ... Out of that began to form small groups of women — so-called consciousness-raising groups — who talked about our lives in order to keep each other from going stark raving mad."

Morgan's group was called New York Radical Women. At monthly meetings in cramped apartments, the 13 members reflected on the oppression they experienced daily as women. A frequent topic of conversation was the Miss America pageant, which many members felt had "programmed" them from an early age to be genial, simple and submissive.

"It had a huge influence on their lives," says Morgan, who suggested that the women use the skills they'd developed participating in other social movements to organize their own. They did. And on Sept. 7, 1968, approximately 400 women descended on Atlantic City to protest the Miss America pageant.

As male onlookers hurled insults like rocks, Morgan and her sisters spent the day singing, chanting and distributing leaflets of their grievances. At one point, women at the pageant disrupted it. Meanwhile, women outside threw what they considered symbols of oppression — bras, makeup, mops, girdles, high heels — into a large "freedom trash can."

"We never planned to burn bras, and we never did," Morgan says. She says the myth of "bra-burning feminists" began with a *New York Post* reporter whose story suggested female protesters might one day burn bras the way some male protesters had burned their draft cards.

With or without charred undergarments, the women's movement that eventually spawned pussy hats and #MeToo was officially underway.

### Gay becomes 'good'

By most accounts, the gay rights movement began June 28, 1969, when New York police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar, triggering riots by patrons and others protesting mistreatment by law enforcement. In fact, gay liberation began much earlier.

"There had been an organized gay and lesbian movement going back to the beginning of the 1950s, but ... they worked behind the scenes, and many of their members used pseudonyms because there was real fear of what could happen if you were in any way identified as gay," says LGBT historian John D'Emi-

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lio, author of *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*.

That changed in the 1960s.

"With the influence of the civil rights movement, a small number of gay-rights activists in big cities began taking a more overt approach so that by the middle of the 1960s they were starting to have public protests," D'Emilio says. "Those separate organizations began in the second half of the '60s to create national networks."

The largest was the North American Conference of Homophile Organizations (NACHO), which held its third annual conference in Chicago in 1968. There, representatives from 30 organizations established a shared agenda that included the decriminalization of gay sex and an end to discrimination against gays in civil service.

There wasn't universal agreement on the way forward. While older members of the movement wanted to normalize homosexuality, younger members wanted to radicalize it.

"The '68 NACHO conference ... was notable not only for how large and solidified a national conference it was, but also for the reactions of many of the early founding member organizations who by 1968 had become disillusioned by NACHO's preference for assimilationist tactics," says James Conley, lead curator of "Gay is Good: Homophile Activism Before Stonewall," an exhibit running through September at Chicago's Gerber/Hart Library and Archives. "Their reactions ... telegraphed the movement's restlessness and desire for more visceral and direct action."

That desire was evident in the adoption at the conference of an official slogan: "Gay is Good," which challenged religious and medical objections to homosexuality in the spirit of "Black is Beautiful," a catchphrase of the Black Power movement.

"It was the first time someone had really and powerfully changed the narra-



**A button from 1968 with the slogan that challenged attitudes toward homosexuality.** AP

tive in such a public way," Conley says.

From there, it was a straight line to Stonewall — and every gay-rights victory since.

"What happened after Stonewall would not have happened without the groundwork that was laid before it," D'Emilio says.

### Sex comes out of the shadows

Underlying both the women's and gay rights movements was the sexual revolution. Except it wasn't a revolution at all; rather, it was an evolution, says Gillian Frank, a historian of sexuality, a visiting fellow at Princeton University's Center for the Study of Religion and co-host of the *Sexing History* podcast.

"Before the 1960s, people were having premarital sex, they were having abortions, they were using contraception and they were engaging in same-sex sexual activities. But much of it was hidden,"

Frank says. The 1960s were significant, she says, not because they altered how people had sex, but because they altered how people talked about it. "What happened in the late 1960s was a shift from the covert to the overt."

The 1940s and '50s set the stage. Alfred Kinsey, for instance, published his groundbreaking books, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, in 1948 and 1953, respectively. And in 1957, the Supreme Court decided *Roth v. United States*, which loosened obscenity laws in ways that helped pornography become more available.

"There was a breakdown in the code of silence around sex," explains Frank, who says sexual speech hastened sexual permissiveness. "We saw sexual mores loosening, we saw demands in college dorms to cohabit and we saw an increase in sexual activity before marriage — and in people acknowledging it."

Evidence of sexual liberation was everywhere in 1968. The musical *Hair* de-

buted on Broadway, for instance, and Larry Flynt opened his first topless Hustler Club in Dayton, Ohio. The former was the first Broadway show with full frontal nudity while the latter eventually begat Flynt's salacious *Hustler* magazine.

But the increase in sexual discourse didn't just liberate sex; it also politicized it: In 1968, England legalized abortion while the Vatican published *Humanae Vitae*, in which it reaffirmed the Catholic church's opposition to abortion and contraception.

"A lot of struggles around sex ... continue to play out today," Frank says. "These are polarizing debates, and they date back well over 50 years."

### Hippies seek enlightenment

If the sexual revolution was a Volkswagen bus, its most prominent passengers would have been hippies, a subculture of white, middle-class young people whose contrarian lifestyle was a rebellion against their parents' beliefs.



**The musical *Hair* came to Broadway in 1968 and became a sensation — and a lightning rod — with its depictions of a tribe of New York hippies engaging in drug use and sex, rejecting their parents' conservative values and opposing the Vietnam War.** RALPH MORSE, THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES



The radical Yippies — members of the Youth International Party — descended on Chicago during the 1968 Democratic National Convention, where they nominated a pig for president and battled police in the streets outside the convention hall. AP

Jack Lebowitz and Bob Bower wear flowers in their hair in New York's Central Park in April 1968 — an iconic image of the hippie ethos. BETTMANN ARCHIVE

"Hippies' parents grew up in the '30s and had nothing because of the Great Depression. Then the '40s came along, and they still had nothing because of the war. So after World War II they became materialists who were obsessed with consumer culture," says William Rorabaugh, a history professor at the University of Washington and author of *American Hippies*. "Their kids thought that was totally wrong. They didn't care much about stuff. They decided there were other, more important things in life. And so they completely rejected their parents' values."

Instead of tangible wealth, hippies sought intangible feelings like enlightenment, which they pursued with the help of free love, psychedelic rock and "mind-expanding" drugs like marijuana, LSD, peyote and magic mushrooms.

"It was about spiritual seeking and thumbing your nose at the establishment," Rorabaugh says of hippies' drug use, which precipitated the 'war on drugs' in 1968, when President Lyndon Johnson established the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs to "serve notice to the pusher and the peddler that their criminal acts must stop."

Although hippies believed in peace and free love, most of them weren't political — the primary exception being anti-war "Yippies," a group of anarchists and absurdist who borrowed hippie sensibilities to advance a political agenda.

Founded in 1967, the Yippies were known for their flag — a green cannabis leaf on top of a red star against a black background — and their theatrical stunts, like trying to levitate the Pentagon. Their movement culminated at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, where they nominated for president a pig named Pigasus. An ensuing riot in which anti-war protesters were attacked by police caused hundreds of injuries and arrests over five days.

But hippies' legacy wasn't political. It was cultural, Rorabaugh says. They deserve credit for natural foods, sustainability and even the personal computer, he says. "Steve Jobs was a hippie."

## Fashion makes a statement

Hippies' rebelliousness extended to their personal aesthetic. Both men and women grew their hair long, for instance, and exchanged tailored fashions for loose-fitting clothes made of natural fibers like cotton and hemp. Instead of dark colors and neutrals they wore bright floral patterns, paisleys and tie-dyes. They didn't like to buy clothes, either; they preferred to make or recycle them.

Although she was just 8 in 1968, Mona Lucero was deeply impressed by hippie looks. "I experienced the 1960s through the eyes of a little girl, watching what people were wearing," says Lucero, now a Denver-based fashion designer. "Both women's and men's fashions were changing dramatically during that time."

Hippies weren't the only ones sporting radical threads.

Young feminists, for instance, embraced hip-hugger jeans and mini-skirts as physical manifestations of their movement. "Women wanted to be who they were," says Lucero, who recalls her older sister getting sent home from school for wearing long bangs and a mini-



skirt. "They didn't want to have the social constraints of women in the 1950s, and they didn't want to have the literal constraints, either."

So, too, with men. "The late '60s and early '70s were known as the 'Peacock Revolution' because men began wearing clothes that were more expressive, more colorful and tighter-fitting," Lucero says. "It started with gay men's culture, then straight men started to adopt it because there was a rejection of hyper-masculinity and a general opening-up of sexuality."

Because it reflects culture so neatly, fashion is a fitting metaphor for 1968 — a patchwork of social and political movements knit together by a common thread.

"The 1960s in some ways were more important than earlier decades because we're still wearing a lot of the same things," Lucero concludes.

She's right, of course. In more ways than one.