This article about the 1968 Democratic convention demonstrations is one of several that I wrote for the Mount Holyoke College newspaper during my senior year. I had not been involved with the newspaper previously, but a change in the paper’s editorship and my political activism gave me the courage to begin to share my views in print.

One thing this article does not say is that I was one of the few Black women who participated in the Chicago demonstrations. Although I had been involved in campus antiwar organizing since my first year of college, and had heard one of Martin Luther King Jr.’s earliest speeches against the war, in front of the United Nations in the spring of 1967, many in the Black community still viewed the antiwar movement as a white issue. Consciousness about the connections between the Black struggle, anti-imperialism, the disproportionate numbers of Black men who were fighting and dying in Vietnam, and stopping the war against a Third World people increased in the years following Chicago. Those of us who had been involved in antiwar activity, which eventually grew into a mass movement, were clear that our protests had affected popular opinion and were a significant factor in curtailing U.S. military involvement.

Rereading this piece, I was struck by my surety that violence was not planned by the demonstrators nor by any of the leaders. I know that I did not hear anyone call for violence against the police, but it is conceivable that some of the demonstrators and groups there advocated violence, though I was not aware of it. The people around me in the streets practiced disciplined nonviolence in the face of what was later described by a federal commission as a “police riot.”
Chicago Firsthand

*A Distortion of Reality*

There is something quite futile and also presumptuous about adding words to the thousands already written about the bizarre cruelty of the convention in Chicago. The world was indeed watching and the media had a special interest in reporting the events surrounding the convention, having been brutalized by the police for the first time in a northern city themselves.

There have been enough words to last a long time, or at least until the next time that people are beaten in the streets for peace and freedom. However, I can tell something that has not been told and that is what happened to me as an individual during forty-eight hours in the streets of Chicago.

Making the decision to go and participate in the demonstrations was the most difficult aspect of the experience, and once the decision was made, I found myself being fatalistic about what would probably be a physically dangerous situation. Since I had never swallowed tear gas, been maced or hit on the head with a billy club, I could not be specifically afraid of these things. On the Monday that we left Cleveland for Chicago I bought a canteen, but decided that a helmet was a capitulation to their nightmare, their distortion of reality and morality, and wore my usual head covering of hair.

When we arrived in Chicago on Tuesday morning, we circled the Amphitheatre area, which with its signs of “No Trespassing” and yards of barbwire resembled a concentration camp or perhaps a SAC missile base. As we were leaving the stockyards a policeman
stopped our car and asked us where we were going. D— answered that he was visiting his brother who lives in Chicago and gave the address. The policeman told us to leave there and never come back again, and as it turned out we never did.

Tuesday was a relatively quiet day. I participated in a series of demonstrations sponsored by the Student Health Organization and the Medical Committee for Human Rights at the Cook County Hospital–University of Illinois Medical School Complex. I carried a sign that said something about admitting Black students to medical schools in a proportion that reflects the number of Black people in the population, and was told repeatedly by a large and boisterous woman in a pink dress that I should go to school in Russia.

That evening we heard Bobby Seale, a leader of the Black Panthers, speak in Lincoln Park. It is always curious to me to see a certain type of white person receive with such enthusiasm the promise of the destruction of their society by Black people, but perhaps they are so accepting because they are still naive enough to think that it will not happen.

We went after this speech to a show in the Coliseum. It was extraordinarily inspiring to see Jean Genet and William Burroughs and finally Dick Gregory (a truly gentle man) on stage speaking to us and with us. It was suggested that we proceed after the show to Grant Park in front of the Hilton, where people from Lincoln Park were already arriving.

This would be our first contact with the police and we were nervous as we walked toward the Loop. Surprisingly, nothing happened that night. At one point the police pushed us back off the sidewalk onto the grass, but this was done efficiently and without force. At one point the singer Phil Ochs was standing near us and we listened to him talk to someone for awhile and then drifted away. We also spoke to some policemen who were laconic, but not hostile. We finally went home at about 2 a.m. Wednesday. The day of the nominations had already begun.

The rally in Grant Park the next afternoon, where the first incident of violence in which I was involved broke out, was
disappointingly small in numbers. This would not be New York and the United Nations or even Washington and the Pentagon. The police rushed us as we were sitting on benches listening to Carl Oglesby, because some persons had tried to take down the American flag and put up a revolutionary red flag. A whole section of benches was overturned, tear gas canisters were thrown, and people were beaten. A boy who had been hit in the head bled over my raincoat and shirt and I finally became scared of what was to happen.

It should be clearly understood by those people who were not there that violence was not planned by the demonstrators, in the sense that offensive tactics were never discussed. It was recognized however that the police officers would undoubtedly have orders directly from Mayor Daley to use the weapons at their disposal and many demonstrators were prepared for these assaults with helmets and wet cloths to breathe through. Vaseline was thought to be a good coating against mace, but the first-aid teams did not recommend its use. In short, violence was expected, because it was known that the police were ready to promote it. It was never the policy of the demonstration’s leaders, however, for people to reciprocate with violence.

After the flagpole incident most people assembled to begin a nonviolent march to the Amphitheatre for which there was no permit, although repeated requests for one had been made months prior to the convention.

When we got down to the Hilton, the streets were full of people. After some minutes of indecision we sat down as a group in the center of the street and the police initiated their tactic of forming a human wedge to push us back onto the sidewalks and away from the hotel. Mace, tear gas, pepper gas, and severe beatings implemented the police action. We were in the streets for four hours. Whenever the police rushed us, we would yell to each other “WALK, WALK, WALK,” so that we would not trample each other.

Sometimes we would also yell “Don’t throw, don’t throw,” because people were mad and reacting with very human and
logical anger toward an incredible situation. I do not know what was being thrown, probably rocks mostly. But a few rocks don’t make a hell of a lot of difference against thousands of clubs. Other “weapons” that were found were probably planted either by the police or by “hoodlums.” The fact that we could yell this advice to our comrades, however, can be considered a type of victory, a victory of conscience and of morality.

At one point, when we had been gassed very badly and pushed far back into the park, I found myself unable to stop crying from the inside because it was so difficult to accept what was happening. Children were being beaten and gassed because they wanted an alternative to war and racism. The adult establishment responded to this demand for peace and justice by exercising a kind of institutionalized hatred.

After eight hours outside we dragged ourselves home and watched with empty eyes the nomination of Hubert Humphrey. The next morning we left.

1968