

Kusch, Frank

Battleground Chicago: The Police and the 1968 Democratic National Convention

Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 2004. 206pp

Chris Gair

University of Birmingham

The 1968 Chicago Democratic National Convention is remembered as possibly the supreme illustration of the irreconcilable divisions within the United States at the height of anti-Vietnam War protest. Although—unlike at South Carolina State College, People's Park or Kent State—no one was killed as a result of police or state trooper aggression, the week's events have been revisited repeatedly in countercultural histories chronicling institutional abuse of power during a turbulent decade in American history. Even Donald Rumsfeld—then a Republican Representative for Illinois—talked of 'police brutality', though there was certainly an element of political opportunism in his desire (fairly accurately) to lay the blame for this on Chicago mayor, Richard J. Daley.

Frank Kusch approaches what occurred from an unfamiliar angle, using interviews with many of the police involved in the week's confrontations to construct a narrative that is broadly supportive of their position and critical of the protestors' actions. Most of the interviewees are working class, white, Catholic family men, who feel that what they did was justified in the light of provocation from demonstrators and pressure from Daley's office. Their testimony provides a reminder of the absurdity of the middle class New Left's desire to build political ties with the white working classes and displays the fear—both of African Americans and of the 'rotten generation' of 'longhairs'—that contributed to the confrontations that followed. There is also a sense that, for the police, the press were a collection of 'commies', working in collusion with the protestors and deserving of the beatings they received from a force that made no distinction between reporters and demonstrators.

Although the men interviewed for the book have had more than three decades to think about what happened and to structure histories that justify their behaviour, their narratives are replete with inconsistencies and prejudices. In some cases, such as when one officer describes the 'textbook crowd control' deployed all week, their claims are laughable; in others, as when more than one officer testifies that the police used restraint because they did not want to jeopardize their pensions, they suggest a cynical lack of concern for others. Worse still, there are moments when the police conform to the stereotypes constructed by the counterculture at the time: on the same page that Officer Steve Nowakowski complains about how the 'uninformed...make us into caricatures', Officer Sam McMaster explains that, 'we knew they were not coming to have a love-in, like that Ginsbeal guy [Allen Ginsberg].... They were just harmless idiots and faggots.... But that motherfucker [Tom] Hayden and *Hoffman*—that Jew bastard and these other fuckers...those bastards were up to no good.' Strangely, one of the most common excuses for police violence was the offence caused by the protestors' use of obscene

language. The hatred for and sheer lack of knowledge of countercultural lifestyle, with officers suggesting that smoking ‘pot’ prompted the demonstrators’ own turn to violence, provides further confirmation that many of the police were looking for any excuse to vent their own resentment against an inexplicably other group of Americans.

While Kusch has clearly conducted extensive research into Chicago police culture, his book would benefit from better knowledge of the anti-War movement. He seems to think that Country Joe and the Fish—one of the best known countercultural bands—were simply called ‘Joe and the Fish’, repeatedly calls the writer Terry Southern, who was in Chicago as a journalist, an ‘activist’, and frequently collapses distinctions between different groups of protestors. Thus, while his claims about police restraint are sometimes well supported (as when he notes approvingly that there was no violence against protestors once they had been arrested), accounts of oppositional resistance are ill-considered. It seems bizarre to accuse protestors who wore helmets on the second night of clashes of being provocative given what they had experienced the night before; likewise, it is unclear why he condemns the demonstrators who ‘threw gas canisters back at the cops.’

On other occasions, there is a tendency to assert rather than demonstrate claims—‘by most accounts’, ‘other reports’, ‘others claimed’—that provide unsubstantiated (and unreferenced) endorsement of what Kusch concludes was a ‘measured’ police response. Kusch supports the police line that most of the troublemakers were out-of-towners intent on causing trouble, without considering the likelihood that a national convention *would*, by definition, attract those from beyond the city limits. Likewise, he doesn’t question the police claims that the press only photographed instances of police violence and ignored examples of demonstrators attacking cops, although the lack of such documentation is staggering given the (acknowledged) presence of government agents filming events and the (unacknowledged) suspicion that not all American journalists working in 1968 were ‘commies.’ Ultimately, therefore, Kusch achieves half of what he set out to do: the story is retold from the perspective of the officers on the street but—bar illustrating the pressure that they were under from Daley—this does little to redeem them. Instead, in a moment of supreme irony, the effect is more akin to Abbie Hoffman’s Yippie desire to use Convention week as an opportunity to disturb and disrupt images of America as a peaceful democracy where force would only be used as a last resort against those unpatriotic enough to question foreign and domestic policy.