

Tom Hayden, Born-Again Middle American

REUNION: A Memoir

By Tom Hayden
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By David J. Garrow

MENTION Tom Hayden's name even to a group of distinctly older students, as I did recently, and they identify him immediately as Jane Fonda's husband. One could complain that it is a sad commentary on our culture that Hayden is better known as a movie star's spouse than as perhaps the pre-eminent New Left student activist of the 1960s, but Hayden himself likely regrets such an identification much less than '60s historians. Indeed, it is no small irony that Hayden, who, in the 15 years since his marriage to Fonda has built a substantive and successful career in California politics, is far more at ease with his identity from these past 15 years than he is with his earlier, even more visible life as one of the 1960s' most controversial figures.

In this honest, impressive and at times quite moving autobiography, Hayden strives with considerable success to evaluate his dramatic evolution during the 1960s and to explain the far more mainstream political orientation he has adopted since the early 1970s. Even now only 48 years old, Hayden frankly and accurately speaks of himself as "damaged, but a survivor."

The only child of relatively apolitical, middle-class Roman Catholic parents, Hayden grew up in the Detroit suburb of Royal Oak before attending college at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. His first three years of college were generally unexceptional; "nothing met the need for enrichment and adventure," Hayden writes in reflecting upon that time.

Then, coincident with becoming editor of the campus paper, the *Michigan Daily*, in 1960, Hayden came into contact with the young black activists whose movement was sweeping the South. Recalling one 1960 student conference where he met several impressive representatives of the new Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Hayden remembers that "this was a key turning point, the moment my political identity began to take shape," for "here were the models of charismatic commitment I was seeking."

After graduation, Hayden went south himself as the first field secretary of a nascent organization he had first joined in Ann Arbor, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). After he was beaten by civil rights opponents during a trip to McComb, Miss., Hayden's attraction to the southern movement grew at the same time that he became more and more committed to the political future of SDS as an organization.

In June 1962, SDS held a major convention in Port Huron, Michigan, to review and adopt a lengthy statement of its political aims that Hayden had been asked to draft. In time this "Port Huron Statement" became a justly famous document, for, more than any other item, it captures and reflects the youthful idealism and egalitarian hopes that were the best parts of the 1960s student activism.

More than anything else, the Port Huron document emphasized the importance of



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Tom Hayden in 1968

democratic participation. "We were envisioning a new and alternative process that involved people as independent and creative human beings, expressing a new force outside of existing institutions." That was what SNCC's grass-roots organizing work in the Deep South reflected, and it was what a parallel SDS program for northern, urban, community organization-building known as "ERAP" (Economic Research and Action Project) also aspired to.

Beginning in summer 1964, Hayden spent the better part of four years as an

ERAP community organizer in Newark, N.J. Despite some small but locally-significant achievements, these years did not witness the progress that ERAP and Hayden had hoped for. Part of the problem was that the Johnson administration's "War on Poverty" did not fundamentally address the basic problems of "effective job creation and better education" that plagued black Newark, but another part was that America's growing involvement in Vietnam was deflecting more and more resources into destructive rather than constructive endeavors.

Hayden's concern about Vietnam led him to accept a late 1965 invitation to join two anti-war historians, Staughton Lynd and Herbert Aptheker, in a North Vietnamese-sponsored visit to Hanoi. It was a choice that would be both instructive and hugely controversial. "What began as an exercise in amateur diplomacy," Hayden writes, "taught me more than I could imagine about war and revolution and inflicted unhealed scars, not to mention political baggage, that I still carry today."

Hayden's conclusion that America's conduct in Indochina—especially the aerial bombing—was fundamentally evil led him towards an increasingly harsh view of American society. He nonetheless maintained private contacts on the war issue with such establishment figures such as Averell Harriman and Robert Kennedy, but by the summer of 1968, following the back-to-back assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Kennedy, Hayden had reached what he terms "the depths of alienation." With the prospects for an anti-war presidential nominee in 1968 snuffed out, the electoral process no longer seemed to offer any possible referendum on the war.

IT WAS in that setting that Hayden, along with other anti-war radicals such as Rennie Davis, Abbie Hoffman, and Dave Dellinger, went forward with protests at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago that many feared—and some knew—would end in violence. Hayden remains uncomfortable with some of the

particular details concerning his involvement in those disorders—an involvement that led to a federal conspiracy indictment, a lengthy and tumultuous trial and eventual dismissal of the charges—but he is relatively forthright about how low an ebb his life reached in the 1968-1971 period.

Then, in 1972-1973, Hayden returned to anti-war political organizing, this time in southern California, and found his renewed involvement a healing experience. "I had gone to the brink of breakdown, to the preliminary stages of civil strife, but now there were signs that working within the fabric of society was producing change." Indeed, Hayden claims, "I was a 'born-again' middle American, emotionally charged by my re-acceptance in the political mainstream."

Recommitted to electoral politics, Hayden waged a respectable but unsuccessful 1976 primary challenge against incumbent Democratic Senator John Tunney, an "orthodox liberal" who prevailed 54 percent to 36 percent, only to then lose to Republican S.I. Hayakawa. Six years later, Hayden ran for a California State Assembly seat, in part because "I wanted the democratic process to confirm my legitimacy like nothing else could." After extremely tough—and exceptionally costly—primary and general election campaigns in which Hayden's opponents highlighted his allegedly traitorous 1965 trip to Hanoi, Hayden prevailed, and has retained his seat in 1984 and 1986 as well.

Last year James Miller, in his extremely valuable study of SDS and the New Left, *Democracy Is in the Streets*, wrote of Hayden that "it is striking how few colleagues believe that they ever really knew him." True as that may be, it is not a sentiment that any reader of this book is likely to share. Especially after reading Hayden's exceptionally moving description of his 1978 reconciliation with his long-estranged father, one views Hayden as not only a commendable though scarred political survivor, but as an impressive individual whose turmoils and stresses, public and private, over three decades' time have made him a better human being.

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