



On the Left: The Powell Memo started it

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April 3, 2023

We're not at the end of political radicalism but you can see it — far off — from here. It began in the 1960s and I predict it will end by 2030. After 70 years, it will die of exhaustion.

Louis Powell was a brilliant corporate attorney in the 1950s and 1960s. He, like almost all adult Americans, was shocked over the raucous, radical 1960s. He reacted and we see the mutation of his reaction today.

“The Sixties” really were earth-shaking and culture-changing. A sturdy and confident (maybe too confident) USA endured seven cultural revolutions at the same time.

We were told that America was the most racist country on earth. Cities burned and protests spread while our ugly segregated past was slowly dismantled. Malcolm X and Martin Luther King were assassinated. The police murdered Black Panthers. Businesses and colleges had to adopt affirmative action, a shock.

We were told that we were the world's premier polluters with Rachel Carson's “Silent Spring,” which began the environmental movement. President Nixon passed the Clean Air and the Clean Water Acts, which shocked conservative businessmen.

We were told that American men were “male chauvinist pigs.” (Strange, I thought. I'm old enough to remember all the women who came home with GIs after “The War,” who remarked on how much freedom they had compared to their back-home sisters.) Radical women burned their bras. Young women entered many fields that had always been male territory — shock!

We were told that we were the world's greatest warmonger, citing the Vietnam War in which we bombed little Vietnam with B-52s. Draft cards were burned and young men emigrated to Canada. Even I was offended.

We were told that anyone over 30 couldn't be trusted.

With the pill we were told that sex was for recreation, not procreation, a big shock.

When Ralph Nader accused American businesses of producing dangerous products, the consumer movement was ignited. Lawsuits blossomed, shocking corporate America.

Seven revolutions all at once. Sometimes I wonder if we've yet recovered.

So when attorney Powell wrote the Powell Memo to the national Chamber of Commerce we should see it today as a normal conservative reaction to the radical Sixties. He thought that the USA was rushing toward socialism and loss of freedom.

He was distressed by Nader especially, and also by student radicals, noting Berkeley's Free Speech Movement and Cornell University's "takeover" by radical Blacks. He was shocked by fellow lawyers such as attorney William Kunstler, who snarled, "You must learn to fight in the streets, to revolt, to shoot guns; we will learn how to do all the things that property owners fear."

Conservatives generally shared Powell's alarm. Economist Milton Friedman said, "It is crystal clear that the foundations of our free society are under wide-ranging and powerful attack."

Of course, today I would say that free-wheeling capitalists were the free ones and they needed to exercise some social responsibility.

Powell asked the chamber to lead a counterrevolution before the USA became a socialist nightmare. He advised the chamber to act "over an indefinite period of years" and "in the scale of financing available only through joint effort ... through national organizations."

Conservative America responded. Thus was born the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute and the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), and a much more activist Chamber of Commerce (including Fairfield-Suisun's), to name just the headliners.

Caught in the headlights of all this were universities and colleges which were, admittedly, pretty radical in those days. The result? Decreased state funding of state higher education, with many talented students shut out and many others borrowing to attend, falling into the clutches of the big banks.

Powell added that conservatives “should evaluate social science textbooks.” Today see this carried out by Republican operatives like Florida’s Ron DeSantis or Texas’ Greg Abbott.

Sandra Day O’Connor reflected on Powell for “a model of human kindness, decency, exemplary behavior and integrity, there will never be a better man.”

What had been a thoughtful reaction has been warped today to present a threat to our whole democratic “experiment.”