

I remember the day. I was twenty years old, living on the Lower East Side of New York City, and working as the office manager in the national office of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).

Well, perhaps office manager is overblown. I kept the books, answered the phone, mimeographed the newsletter, maintained the mailing list, and would have gone out to get coffee for the senior staff, if that was what they wanted.

SDS was still technically the "Student League for Industrial Democracy" (SLID), a left over from the heyday of Democratic Socialism. Our phones were part of their office system upstairs. This may have been part of their fear that some of us, for example, the field secretary, were too close to the Stalinist Third International, as opposed to the Eugene Debs, and LID, Second International. It may have also simplified the surveillance by the FBI of all such organizations.

Shortly after noon, the phones went dead, but not the intercom Vera, from upstairs, LID, buzzed us, and told me that Kennedy had been shot in Dallas. I was very new to left wing politics, and fascinated by the complexity of New York's sectarian ideologies. I could not make sense of most of the disputes, but I did know that Union Square, a few blocks away, was populated by soap box orators, always eager to promote their own analysis. What they might say about this event?

I headed over. Usually by noon time, there were at least two or three orators, with about as large a crowd. I expected, given the unsettling events, and it being lunch hour, there would be many more. There were none. Empty. Nada. An event so major that it is imprinted on all of our minds, and these amateur analysts were literally speechless.

I went back to the office. The field secretary, a few years older than me, and, as indicated above, well versed in the sectarian factionalism of left wing politics, told me to look in the membership files, to see if Lee Harvey Oswald was a member. I did what he told me.

The lesson here is that history triumphs ideology. Much ideology is mere posturing. We learn this again and again, and we seem to forget it about as quickly. For example, in 2008, as the stock market was imploding, as the credit markets froze, as gigantic business collapsed, capitalist business, almost every economist became a Keynesian, and the only supply-siders were a rump part of the Republican Party. Bailouts, stimulus, interest rates were so low that banks could not lose by borrowing at almost zero, and lending at seemingly incredibly low rates.

History trumps ideology. The planes crashed through the World Trade Center, and many of our civil rights were buried in those buildings collapse. We are only now understanding how deeply into our lives the government, and business, have delved.

Or, most recently, we experienced another government shutdown, and then another, the first about money already appropriated by Congress, and the second about border security already passed by both houses of Congress. For reasons beyond rational, the Republican right wing has determined that the Affordable Care Act cannot work. Rather than allow it to collapse of its own accord, they chose to collapse the government. Had they only waited for the roll-out ... But they did not, and the House leaders supported them in their foolishness.

History trumps ideology. Now that there is no history, we are back into the politics, and the news cycle, of ideology. Now that the manufactured crisis has been averted, we seem to be back to ideological business as usual. The news is fishing expeditions regarding Benghazi, kangaroo courts regarding the Health Care roll-out, court appointments blocked, gridlock returns.

The Republicans showed how to play a losing hand. We would never know it from watching television, reading the daily press. "Public opinion" and "learned commentators" seem incapable of separating the gold from the dross. The headlines on CNN are continually "Obama fails ..." or "Administration suffers ..." or "Food stamps malnourished ..." Well, I made that last one up, but any fool can see that the House Republicans willingly support huge subsidies for the largest of farmers, distorting the free market they claim to love so well while chopping away at a program which puts food into the stomachs of children who otherwise would be hungry.

And let's not forget immigration reform ... for some reason it has gone off the radar. How about climate change? Both of these are issues affecting us all, which demand action, and demand the kind of action which can only come from the real political process of compromise. Large issues both, with many moving parts, and all we get are sound bites.

Oswald was a member of Fair Play for Cuba, an organization now a footnote in history, largely because of his involvement in it. Because of his involvement, within one month of the assassination of Kennedy, it no longer existed. SDS survived, despite lacking the kind of big name support Fair Play had garnered -- media stars such as Truman Capote, and Alan Ginsburg, and James Baldwin, and Jean-Paul Sartre.

History came to SDS, in the form of the War in Viet-Nam:
a war which not only distorted this country,
as it distorted Indochina,
but distorted SDS,
transforming it from a Civil Rights organization,
with community organizing in northern cities, the Economic Research and Action
Project (ERAP),
but an antiwar movement,
which distorted,
and lead to its self immolation within five years.

There was no card for Oswald and, had I found Oswald to be a member, there may have been no SDS left. A small swerve in history, Oswald chose Fair Play, because his ideology blinded him to the paramount activist issue of the time, voting rights in the South. SDS survived, wobbly, but survived, about 300 people on the mailing list that year, and the next year, thousands, and then tens of thousands.

It was history which created this prairie fire of organizing. Chapters were springing up unrelated to the national organization. It was as if there was an occupy movement, back then, of the baby boomers. We could tell we were being lied to, about the war, about the land of plenty, and about the land of opportunity, and we were young enough, callow youth, to imagine we could do something about it. We learned not to read the head lines, or listen to

the pundits. We sought our own truth. My hope is that this spirit is still alive.

I went back to college. Columbia's School of General Studies had an admission program suited for students like me, who had tried college and failed, so off I went, uptown, and became a student, and then an activist, at Columbia.

More tales to tell.