

Uncle Sam Wants Me. Chapter Three. Growing Radicalization.

As I slogged unenthusiastically through high school academia, I was only interested in the social aspect. That was mostly centered around my female classmates and my sexual desires toward pretty much all of them. I did have some buddies that I hung around with, but the only thing that I envied about the “cool guys” and/or “jocks” was their greater access to most of the girls. When the hippie and anti-establishment movements finally started to seep into Iowa, I was all in. I started growing my hair long and cadging as much money as I could lay my hands on (I always had some sort of job from paper routes to working in my uncle’s Hobby Shop) to buy records, concert tickets, and non-mainstream clothing that my mom, would never pay for. Fortunately, most of my desired clothing was available at The Salvation Army for a pittance. So, the lion’s share of my meager wealth went towards music. And a growing number of the girls were becoming interested in the counter culture as well. Yippie.

I was able to see The Animals and The Yardbirds perform at my local dancehall in Cedar Rapids. They did songs criticizing the war and society in general. I was also buying Bob Dylan albums while chucking my Beach Boys albums into the trash. I was jazzed. Things were changing and it felt like I was a part of it.

As my eighteenth birthday approached, two watershed events took place. I had to decide what to do after high school graduation and I had to decide whether or not to register for the draft which was required, under penalty of federal law. The penalty for not registering or not submitting to conscription was five years in federal prison. And the feds were not messing around. I quickly decided that I would register as my county was still only drafting twenty-year-olds which would give me two years to figure some way out. At that point American troops on the ground in Viet Nam had passed the four hundred thousand mark and the war was showing no signs of winding down.

The decision on what to pursue after HS graduation was more complicated. I had no interest in more schooling as I had been mostly bored out of my skull in high school. But my mom, who had pretty successfully intimidated me in much of my decision making, insisted that I go to college “or your life will be ruined”. At that point I had my steady sweetie Sue was a willing and often enthusiastic sex partner. I had bedded the good girl. Just twenty miles down the road from our hometown of Cedar Rapids (she still had one more year of high school to complete) in Iowa City, was the University of Iowa, the main outpost of anti-war and pro hippie action in the state. I applied and was accepted on academic probation.

I was more interested in protests and pot smoking and not so much in studying or attending class. The close proximity would also lend itself to frequent quick trips to CR for some sweet lovin with Sue.

I attended my first protest several weeks into my first semester. About one hundred folks, many long haired and intentionally scruffy looking, were protesting the army recruiting of students at the student union. “Keep The Baby Killers Off Campus”. They had effectively blocked the main entrance. Of course, there were several other entrances that anyone wishing to talk to the recruiters could freely use unmolested. But the protesters were making a point and the police were ready to make their own point. There was a large bus parked just up the street full of cops in riot gear with the commander standing out front assessing the situation. There was also a group of counter protesters itching to make a point of their own.

As I walked down to the site of the protest, I had not decided what my role would be. When I arrived and realized the potential for violence and/or arrest, I decided to keep my distance and just be an observer at the first protest I would ever attend. I was not yet willing to risk incarceration or having my skull cracked.

Shortly after I arrived a small band of eight to ten clean cut looking counter-protesters approached the original protesters who were blocking the entrance to the Student Union. As they advanced, the folks on the steps locked arms. The counters tried to grab a few and pull them off the steps. After failing to do that, they started to punch and kick the folks in the first row which dislodged a few of the non-violent protesters. They were then dragged into the street and beaten further. The commander of the riot cops watched but did nothing to stop the obvious illegal assault and battery taking place.

After about twenty minutes of watching the non-violent folks being kicked and punched the police commander walked over and had a brief discussion with the perpetrators of the violence. After that the counters retreated back into the crowd of observers, the riot police started to move in and arrest the original protestors. Most of them went limp and had to be carried to waiting paddy wagons. Over one hundred non-violent protestors were arrested that day and none of the physical aggressors. It gave me a lot to think about.

In the basement of the Student Union there was a large open area and every weekday at noon someone set up a

microphone and PA for anyone who wanted to come up and express their views on any topic of their choosing. A “soap-box”. The day after the skirmish on the front steps, everyone was talking about that. They all were proselytizing about what the next step should be in opposing the war. I had a different take. Even though I had a deep-seated fear of public speaking, I took my place in line and finally got my turn at the mic. “We here at the university, protesting the war, are but a tiny segment of the nation’s population, a small voice in a large sea of voices. And while it is important to make our beliefs heard, our small local voices will have little impact on our countries policies. Yesterday many of us witnessed violent illegal actions on the part of the counter protestors and illegal collusion by the cops for not intervening to stop them. I believe that we should focus on the illegal behavior on the part of local authorities. It is an area where we can exert significant leverage through taking legal action against the police.” I received a few “right-ons” and a smattering of applause. Apparently, most of the audience thought that taking the local cops to court was not as sexy as fighting the mighty war machine in the streets. I did however receive one strong reaction.

I had noticed that a local TV station had a film crew on hand for the soap box and was filming while I spoke. I did not realize that my little snippet would be aired on the evening

news while my folks watched. My mom, and to a lesser extent, my dad, were outraged that their only son was calling out the government authorities on TV. After all, any or all of their friends could and would soon be aware of his anti-establishment beliefs and his damn long hair. I quickly received a phone call from them and an ultimatum. "Stop going to protests and get your haircut or we will cut off your funding for college."

It was a hollow threat since I had not wanted to attend college in the first place. And it had a very ironic consequence. I went right out and got a full-time job working the graveyard shift a gas station about a mile from the dorm. At that time, it was very hard to procure a job with long hair, so I bit the bullet and got a conventional haircut. I started attending class more regularly since I was now footing the bill. And my grades improved because there was so little to do between two and five am that I resorted to studying in order to combat the boredom. Between school and work I had precious little time and energy to go to protests. But by damn I was my own man doing my own thing. To complete the ironic turn, my folks did not realize that I had cut my hair, dialed way back on attending protests, and was doing better in school, because I had cut off all communication with them. I had not cut off communication with my sweet girlfriend Sue.

