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SARAH BALDWIN: From Prague Spring to Paris riots, from the assassination of Martin Luther King Junior to the election of Richard M Nixon, 1968 was a tumultuous time to say the least. Brian Meeks, chair of Africana studies at Brown University, and Ed Steinfeld, director of Brown's Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, sat down to reflect on a year marked by anti-establishment, anti-war counterculture movements.

ED STEINFELD: Brian, thanks so much for chatting today. It's April 4. As we're speaking, it's the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King. And this year also marks the 50th anniversary of the founding of Africana studies at Brown. But as I've really learned from you, 1968 was a year of extraordinary events, even beyond those that I just mentioned.

Can you talk a little bit about what was happening in the world at that time?

BRIAN MEEKS: Well, you know, to begin at home, Ed, '68 wasn't the year of our founding. It was the year when Brown students walked out because of the limited presence of black students, faculty, and courses addressing questions of the African-American community at Brown. And that protest set the stage for the formation of rights and reason theater a year later. And beyond that, the formation of an Afro American studies program, which later arrived into my department, Africana Rites and Reason.

So in effect, it was the birthday as a result of a protest. But the very fact that it was a protest tells us all about what '68 was really about. It was an extraordinary upsurge of student, worker, just general citizen protest across the world. It was not an American phenomenon. It was not a new world phenomenon. It was an international phenomenon, which requires us to reflect on what it was-- why this confluence of different movements gathered together as it were in 1968. And of course, what it has meant. Whether we want to put it on a scale of bad to worse, or just simply how has it affected the world since 1968 in various ways for the better or for the worse, or just simply in different directions.

And that we thought was important, of course. Today is April 4, Martin Luther King's anniversary of his death. It was the anniversary of my father's birth, which is important to me. I can never forget that date.

That was very much a part of the sequence of events, King's death, Robert Kennedy's assassination. There were not just demonstrations happening, but there were tragic events occurring, which led to further mass upheavals, and helped to dictate the future of events in this country and in other places. So if you think of the American events or the events that affected the United States, I would probably begin with the Tet Offensive at the beginning of the year, which, of course, was the huge North Vietnamese offensive against the American presence or against the South Vietnamese troops, which was surprising, was huge, and was ultimately not successful. But simply on its scale and the amount of damage that resulted from it, it said basically that North Vietnam was here to stay.

That the insurgency was not going away. That winning it was not going to be easy, if at all possible. And that, I think, set the stage for the growth of the anti-war movement and the peace movement in the United States and supported worldwide. That this thing could not be won in a traditional sense. And that, I think, was almost like a marker certainly from an American perspective for the beginning of the year. But a lot of other things were going on.

If you think about civil rights, civil rights was already in transition because of the extraordinary impact of the civil rights movement, but also the feeling among young people in particular, independent young people that there was too much violence against the demonstrators in exchange for the benefits that were being won. There was a great deal of impatient with where things were going both in the south and particularly in the north among black youngsters. People were swinging towards black power and a different definition of how to do battle.

ED STEINFELD: My understanding is that the movement was shifting from a focus on civil rights almost exclusively, to economic rights, and access, but also different, as you said, identity issues involving nationalism.

BRIAN MEEKS: Absolutely. For example in the north, the overt civil rights Jim Crow questions were not in the forefront. There were questions of housing. There were questions of access to trade union rights and the benefits that resulted from that. Martin Luther King himself was in the very end struggling to bring together city sanitation workers around questions of unionization, as well as cross race, cross ethnic interests so to speak.

ED STEINFELD: And workplace safety--

BRIAN MEEKS: Workplace safety--

ED STEINFELD: And wages.

BRIAN MEEKS: Absolutely. Different currents were coming to the fore. And the northern currents in particular, and concerns were not quite the same set of concerns as in the south. And that, I think, was captured under the slogan of black power, and the new mood that was sweeping black people. And that was also part of a broader more, which was sweeping white youngsters, students on campuses throughout the country.

You know, the formation of students for a democratic society. The growth of the peace movement, again, an effect of the war in Vietnam, but having its own momentum. The growth of the hippie movement, which might be seen as, perhaps, not exactly in the same direction as a peace movement or the sort of growing left-wing student movement as such. But which was disconnecting from the status quo.

So we have these multiple layers of if you wanted counter cultural or anti-establishment movements, which are gathering force in 1960.

ED STEINFELD: You had mentioned Tet in early '68. But the culture revolution was also raging in China-- had been raging since 1966.

BRIAN MEEKS: Absolutely.

ED STEINFELD: So Chairman Mao and The Red Book--

BRIAN MEEKS: There's a Red Book.

ED STEINFELD: And students mobilized in China, mobilized in France, it seems-- anti-colonial movements. And again as I've learned from you, it wasn't just an international event, but across multiple continents.

BRIAN MEEKS: Absolutely. Let's for the moment focus on the obvious European case. We have the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia.

ED STEINFELD: Right.

BRIAN MEEKS: Which is in purportedly communist country. But which is arguing for a different kind of relationship with the state, which is arguing for a more democratic form of communism. And of course, that movement comes to an abrupt end when Soviet tanks enter Prague, and essentially put it down, and arrest to check on the people who are leading a different approach

to really existing socialism-- to use a term that the Soviets used to use at that point in time. So that's going on in Czechoslovakia.

And in France, of course, they May events. And most people that think about '68 think about France and the huge student, worker allowances which emerged in a very French fashion. If you think about the history of France from the revolution through the 19th century, you have these broad-based movements. Perhaps, the most significant one of the 20th century occurs in 1968 with the alliances, which bring France to a grinding halt. But which ultimately-- and this is another point that we need to make-- is what were the tangible successes of these events? We have mass mobilization.

ED STEINFELD: And were there any tangible links between those? How were those events speaking to one another?

BRIAN MEEKS: I think there is the beginning of a conversation going on. In some instances, that conversation is much tighter. If we think about the North Atlantic linkages, there are real connections going on between what is happening in France, what is happening in the United States, what is happening in Britain, where the anti-nuclear weapons movement is gaining significant purchase. But there is also an anti-Vietnam movement which is extraordinarily vibrant in Britain. You know, there is this sort of Anglo-Atlantic popular connection which is going on, which is driving that.

And so it's responding very much to what the United States is doing in Vietnam, and calling on the British government to take a less supportive position than it typically takes with the United States.

ED STEINFELD: It's extraordinary to me how many different threads of anti-establishment, anti-status quo movements there were across very different kinds of systems. And I'm reminded in some ways of the present, in that you have things like Brexit. In the UK, you have the election of Donald Trump without really the support of either establishment party in a meaningful way in the US. And France, Macron. In China, a rejection of certain institutions under Xi Jinping.

It feels like another moment-- different politics-- but another moment of somehow, if not connected, at least simultaneous anti-establishment, anti-status quo movements across many different places. Can we learn something from what happened 50 years ago and apply it to the present? Are they related?

BRIAN MEEKS: Well, I think they're related in the sense in which polar opposites are related, because they're part of the same political game. But they are polar opposites. If you think about Brexit, if we think about Donald Trump, if we think about the sort of nationalism that is implicit in that.

1968 was very much the beginnings of a movement beyond narrow nationalism, which was seeking to bridge connections across countries in the direction of a sort of democratic populism.

ED STEINFELD: I wonder whether we're witnessing sort of a counter current in some ways to 1968.

BRIAN MEEKS: Part of the reality is that '68 was followed very quickly by its counter-current, which have never really lost powers or have gained force, in many respects. And if you think about the specific case of the United States and the election of Nixon, at the end of that period-- or you think about the popular insurgence around the Democratic Convention, and then very close to that the defeat of the Democrats in the emergence of Nixon and what Nixon meant with the consolidation of a more rightward direction in American politics, '68 showed the possibility of transnational popular democratic world. But it failed. It failed to consolidate.

And of course, this world was never united by a common program or anything. It was more united by an ethos, which was the ethos that our politics didn't run through the state, that everything was political in the sense that the question of sexual revolution is a question of race. If you counterpoise Prague to Paris, to what is happening in the resistance against racism in the South in the United States, then you can link together a sort of popular democratic impulse, which was at the heart of '68-- but which failed. It failed in the short term to be successful in Prague. It failed in Paris. It failed to change the politics of the US in a fundamental way.

In fact, the politics of the US consolidated in a different direction under Nixon. And of course, we have had much history since then. You know, Carter comes back. But then Reagan comes back. And then neoliberalism, which is a way of looking at the world in a different way. But very much connected.

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ED STEINFELD: There do seem to be some kinds of changes in identity, sexual identity, sexual preference--

BRIAN MEEKS: Absolutely.

ED STEINFELD: Gender, of course, not wholly a story of progress. But some of these changes seem to be more lasting and less ephemeral.

BRIAN MEEKS: Absolutely. And have stock. You pointed to, perhaps, a most successful question-- has been around gender. Advances have been made on race. You know, anyone who thinks that the United States is where it was in 1967 should look back on some of the documentaries that were produced around that time. And to see the progress that has been made.

But you know the old saying the more things change, the more they remain the same. There's so much more to be done building on the foundations that were laid then. So of course, there are questions of race, questions of gender. There have been huge successes. The entire environmental movement, whose roots, of course, precede 1968, but which were echoed in the hippie intervention, and then question of living with nature, and so on and so forth. And how that reflected a sentiment that wanted to move towards a greater peace with the environment.

That has made huge advances. Of course, all of these things now are certainly in an American context are being put in the eyesight of regime, which seems to want to have an entirely new approach to gender, to perhaps to race. certainly to immigration.

ED STEINFELD: Yeah, it seems that '68 and the current moment underscore the fragility of institutions, and norms, and rules in positive and negative ways. That what we take is absolutely fixed and unchangeable can come crashing down so quickly. And I think for Americans, that's a very unfamiliar lesson. But for some other people-- in China, for example, it's now maybe taken for granted or a real fear that what we take is fixed, and unchangeable, and stable can, with a snap of a few fingers, disappear quickly.

BRIAN MEEKS: Well, I think, and you, of course, will know this far better than I do, but the Chinese concept of time out of history is on a very different scale than anybody in the west. You know, the west, as we know it, know post Montezuma is 500 years old-- the widest definition. That is simply one epoch in Chinese history. So therefore, this sense of change-- maybe what was late in 1968 in terms of the mental mindset about what the relationships between people, the relationships between people and the state, the relationships between people as a whole and the environment, maybe all of these things have been set on the agenda of human history. And the short-term political setbacks might be less important than the long-term ways in which people look at these relationships in a fundamentally different way.

ED STEINFELD: I think that's such an important point on this day as I reflect on Martin Luther King's legacy and his lessons. And I'm, of course, a not sufficiently informed observer of that student of that history. But my sense is that Martin Luther King himself expressed a kind of tension between patience and optimism, that the arc does bend toward justice, and the long run versus an ending of patience and a desire to see change now, and an unwillingness. And maybe in that sense, a convergence with more aggressive-- I'm not sure what the right word is-- threads of the civil rights movement to say we can't just wait.

And I guess today too we face that tension, that optimism, that over the long run it will work out. And an impatience and a desire to move now.

BRIAN MEEKS: Well, we need to remember King himself put his body and his life on the line, as did so many other people in that movement and in those times. He was arrested many times, and ultimately paid the ultimate sacrifice of his own life. But the risk taking-- patience with constant risk taking is perhaps the best way to define King's legacy in that he was out there, he was in jail, he was disliked by vast swaths of the population who thought that he was an agitator. You know, the FBI certainly did think much about him at the time. And yet, he put his body on the line, paid the ultimate price, has set an example of what is possible.

There are so many other people who did that. And if you think about the simple image that has just come to my mind, and I suspect it's from the Chicago convention of a young man putting a flower into the barrel of a raised National Guards rifle. It kind of, you know, has become iconic. And it looks cute. But you know, it could have ended in a very different way.

And he was willing to do that. He was making a profound point about peace and resistance. Because putting approaching that rifle and putting that flower was an act of resistance, if nothing else.

ED STEINFELD: Yeah, this 50th anniversary of so many things in 1968, including, we'll call it the birth date of Africana at Brown. Can you talk a bit about some of the intellectual activities, the scholarly activities that you're planning to mark the 50th?

BRIAN MEEKS: Well, you know, we've been playing with this for some time. Maybe not long enough. But we've come up with a set of activities that begin at Brown's commencement this year. We're going to have four days of looking at the music of 1968.

ED STEINFELD: Fantastic.

BRIAN MEEKS: And what essentially the format will be is a series of gatherings at Africana's Rites and Reason Theater, in which we get experts on the music of '68 to talk about different genres and their impact. So we'll be playing music. We'll be interacting with the audience and with the people present as to the meaning of the music.

ED STEINFELD: Yeah, we've been talking mostly about politics and social movements.

BRIAN MEEKS: Absolutely.

ED STEINFELD: But the unbelievable explosion of creativity of that year, it's just amazing. And it must be connected somehow to the other ferment that was going on.

BRIAN MEEKS: Yeah, and at both ends. Both as product of and as extraordinary influence of--

ED STEINFELD: The driver of. Right.

BRIAN MEEKS: And driver of the events. And if you don't include just the year 1968 alone but the lead up too and the immediate aftermath in terms of the music, then there is this extraordinary generator of popular culture, which occurs in this period. You know, Martha and the Vandellas, Dancing in the Street. James Brown Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud. The whole Woodstock phenomenon. And the music that came out of it, and what that means.

ED STEINFELD: Jimmy Hendrix, Bob Marley.

BRIAN MEEKS: Yeah. Yeah, you know, it's amazing. And of course, there is not so much on the forefront of the popular movement, but on the side, the emergence of avant-garde jazz, which occurs slightly before, but then overlaps with 1968. You know, people like Coltrane, and Pharoah Sanders, Archie Shepp. There are a whole set of people who changed the whole mood-- not for the first time is this happening-- but changed the whole mood, style, and rhythm of jazz, undoubtedly affected by the civil rights movement and the black power movement. And reacting to it and also influencing it.

So we're going to be looking at a number of different genres. We're certainly going to be looking at sort of popular music. We're going to be looking at rhythm and blues, in particular at jazz. We'll be looking at reggae. And we're actually getting a good friend of mine Ibo Cooper, who was leader of a very iconic reggae band called Third World, which wasn't Bob Marley and

the Wailers. But not very far behind. They often opened for Bob Marley and the Wailers.

And he'll be coming here with a singer to sort of demonstrate, articulate the movement of reggae around this period, and how it led to the popular forms, which emerged in the 1970s. And we're going to have someone who is a dance expert that's going to do the dances of 1968.

ED STEINFELD: It's going to be fantastic.

BRIAN MEEKS: So we're going to begin with a series of events at commencement. Then things are really going to happen in the fall. We're going to have a play on the student walkout at Brown, which will be staged a couple of times. And we're going to really reflect on what that meant. And that will occur in early September.

Then, of course, you know that because Watson is working with Africana on a global 60th seminar, which we're going to hold in November, and the lineup for this is going to be really remarkable. For two days, we're going to have some of the leading scholars who have worked on the question of '68, or on the post-colonial question centered around that postwar period where decolonization was happening rapidly. And we're going to try to bring in a cross-section of people from different places and different interests, who would be talking about what did '68 mean? What did that convergence mean? And where is it going?

And you know, the list is just fantastic. Our lead speaker is going to be Achille Mbembe from the Cameroon, who's at University of Wits in South Africa. And the list of speakers, were I to have the time, I'd start to run them off. But it's going to be quite an event. And of course you know all about it, because you're involved with us on this one.

ED STEINFELD: Well, it's a privilege for us. This is such an important event for our own intellectual development here at Watson. But, of course, this isn't about Watson. It's about the Brown scholarly community. And this kind of cooperation between Africana and Watson is something that I think it's not just essential for what we do, it offers so many interesting opportunities for intellectual creativity and opportunities, of course, to reflect on history. But also to reflect on our current moment, and where we're going, and how to understand it, and maybe how to effect positive change.

BRIAN MEEKS: Absolutely, and I just think that I should add to that, while agreeing with everything you say. That, of course, we're also planning to have a keynote speaker, not as part of this conference,

but as a keynote for all of these events. And at the end of it. And that will probably be early in 2019.

ED STEINFELD: Great.

BRIAN MEEKS: We're still trying to tie down who that is. But we hope it is somebody who will attract vast masses of people in a 1968 scale.

ED STEINFELD: Right. I think that, of course I feel that the keynote speaker, the invited speakers are essential for invigorating the conversation. At the same time in the spirit of '68, I feel that what's most important is lots of participation by the community, lots of maybe challenging of hierarchies, or at least putting aside the hierarchies, and getting as many voices as possible, in as many different kinds of people as possible, as many different backgrounds as possible into this discussion. And maybe celebrating that kind of inclusion.

BRIAN MEEKS: And we're hoping that happens. And I should say from our side, that we're extraordinarily happy that Africana is in on this with Watson. We think it's an opportunity. And we look forward to it being successful.

ED STEINFELD: Oh, I really look forward to it. It's one of the things that makes me most excited about being here at Brown right now. Brian, thanks so much for taking the time. And I can't wait to continue this conversation in this cooperation in the months to come. Congratulations on the 50th anniversary.

BRIAN MEEKS: Thank you.

ED STEINFELD: The birth date of Africana studies at Brown.

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