INTRODUCTION TO THE MOVIE
"CONVENTIONS: THE LAND AROUND US"

Purpose of the Film:

To examine the alternative political life styles and cultures which collided in Chicago at the 1968 Democratic Convention.

Concepts Used in the Film:

The film shows an attack on the existing society and social norms of the 1960s and the attempt to form an alternative. This occurred not only by protestors in the streets but by political clashes inside the convention itself. What was under attack was not only the Democratic Party, or this particular political party convention, or even the government of the time, but the bureaucracy and its constraints which are so pervasive in modern society.

1. Anarchism: All forms of coercive and hierarchical government are thought incompatible with individual liberty and are to be replaced by voluntary cooperation.

2. Bureaucracy: Government by bureaucrats or administrators characterized especially by a hierarchy of authority, employment by "merit," considerable "red tape," and bounded autonomous zones of jurisdiction.

Quotations and Notes:

The film opens by juxtaposing the singing of happy birthday to Lyndon Johnson at the Democratic Convention with the shouting of "Fuck You, Lyndon Johnson" at the Yippies! Alternatives birthday party. We are then introduced to the Yippies! by Abbie Hoffman and by scenes primarily from Lincoln Park before the violent confrontations.

Abbie Hoffman:

> "I think American culture is sterile, boring, evil, corrupt, . . . and old. Central government has a tremendous amount of power in this country, and it's very bureaucratic, and it's as much the bureaucracy of this country, as much as its evilness – especially in terms of the war in Vietnam and the way it treats poor people and black people – that brings us to this park . . . The Yippies! are not really a group, it's a movement, it's a slogan. There are no Yippies! That's the whole thing, it's a slogan. There was an exclamation point, see . . . it's a slogan, you know, 'yipeeee!' Right?"

Hoffman's provides a statement of the goals of the Yippies! in terms of myth-making in his book *Revolution for the Hell of It:*

"We had four main objectives:

1. The blending of pot and politics into a potlitical grass leaves movement. . .
2. A connecting link that would tie together [the political underground] . . .
3. The development of a model for an alternative society.
4. The need to make some statement, especially in revolutionary action-theater terms, about LBJ, the Democratic Party, electoral politics, and the state of the nation.

"To accomplish these tasks required the construction of a vast myth, for, through the notion of myth, large numbers of people could get turned on and, in that process of getting turned on, begin to participate in Yippie! and start to focus on Chicago. *Precision was sacrificed for a greater degree of suggestion."*[1]

In the film "Conventions" we see from the point of view of the "revolutionaries" three interacting situations: 1) the attempt to develop a model for an alternative society, 2) the attempt to maintain the conventional, hierarchical boundaries, and 3) the attempt to puncture reality sleeves and to mount assaults against conventional boundaries.

A Model for an Alternative Society

The alternative society sought by the Yippies! would, according to the film's narrator, be "built around intimate groups of brothers and sisters – affinity groups – whose ability to act in common is based on initiative, on convictions freely arrived at, and on a deep personal involvement," It's physical form in Lincoln Park involved different centers for free food, medical aid, etc. and is to be seen in the covenants and ceremonies, such as the marriage ceremony for Steven and Rita.

The emphasis in this form of society is not on what is prevented, but in the freedom to work out different ways of doing things.

According to Abbie Hoffman:

"We will develop a community; it's the thing that's totally lacking in American society as we view it. I'm here to, uh, because I believe in the concept of alternative society, and I think that our task is to build a new society, based on new premises. You see, when you have an alternative society, you organize people, or you bring people together, around the kinds of things they want to do. You never say 'no,' you know. And it's difficult; I mean, some people want to go this way, some people want to go this way, and they say that those people are interfering with their thing, but somehow it works out. I mean, everybody is allowed to do their thing."

The slogan of the protestors in the film was "do your own thing" but their "thing" was a challenge to the existing social order and its norms. They were also explicitly opposing the war in Vietnam, racial discrimination, and the "Imperial Presidency."

[1] Abbie Hoffman, *Revolution for the Hell of It* (New York: Dial Press, 1968): p. 102.

Maintaining Conventional Boundaries

Boundaries shown in the film included lines of policemen, marked off and barricaded areas, uniforms and symbols of authority, and regular parliamentary procedure. There were authorized routes, authorized behavior, badges and passes, all of which had to be maintained – all of which were vulnerable to attack. The alternative as seen by those established in the current "system" was chaos. Thus, violent repression would be used if necessary to maintain the boundaries.

Narrator:

> "Order can and, if allowed, will emerge naturally, organically, from people acting together: natural emergence, organic development. Industrial society, however, which is characterized firmly by the dominant polarity of boundary-management, cannot tolerate the relative chaos that appears to be a major feature of period of organic development. The boundaries must be maintained. This is the meaning of law and order. Persons acting together to restructure, to re-order their collective social space, to make justice possible in a changing environment, are experienced by those who hold advantage under the old order to be threatening not only to the old order, but all order. Such change-agents are thus repressed in the interest of maintaining old boundaries, in the interest of maintaining hierarchy."

Yet, what is not recognized by those in positions of power is that not all boundaries are equally viable. The redwood fences put up by the city could not hide the poverty that was very real behind those fences. The formal rules that allowed the convention to nominate Vice-President Humphrey for president could not hide the support of the majority of citizens for other candidates and other policies.

Assaults

The Yippies!, first claiming Lincoln Park, then the streets, and then Grant Park, were always met by police and national guard who refuted their claim. Similarly, inside the convention, Eugene McCarthy, Robert Kennedy, and George McGovern delegates were defeated in the battles for party reform, progressive planks in the party platform, and party nominations.

Yet one convention hall sequence, the singing of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," "shows the gratuitousness of attempts to maintain conventional hierarchical boundaries in the face of spontaneous restructuring of a situation." Like King Canute, Carl Albert "tells the waves to go back, and they don't go back."

"Conventions – The Land Around Us" confronts the viewer with the dramatic clash of cultures, values, and life styles in the heightened moment of choosing a President. The choice was to continue existing policies and to maintain the existing

power structure or to make profound and fundamental changes in American politics and society.

STUDY GUIDE FORTHE MOVIE
"CONVENTIONS: THE LAND AROUND US"

Answering the following questions will insure that you have understood the film and the clash of cultures and politics which occurred in Chicago in 1968? If you are uncertain of any of the answers simply review the appropriate section of the film.

A. Background Facts:

1. Who or what were the Yippies!?
2. In the myth and in their own conception, what did Y.I.P. stand for?

B. Concepts:

1. What are the defining characteristics of anarchism?
2. What are the defining characteristics of bureaucracy?
3. How do these concepts help us understand the film?

C. Examples and non-examples:

1. What are some examples of bureaucracy at the Democratic Convention as shown in the film?
2. What are some examples of anarchism at the alternative convention?
3. What are some examples of bureaucracy at the alternative convention?
4. What are some examples of anarchism at the Democratic Convention?

D. **Images and Allegories**:

1. What did Genet in his poem "To the Hippies" suggest was the task which faced them?
2. What image did Vice-President Hubert Humphrey suggest in his nomination acceptance speech to describe the political situation? Why was his image inadequate?
3. What image did Inouye (key note speaker) suggest as the weakness in the anarchism of youth?
4. What candidate did the Yippies! nominate to mock the convention? Why did they choose him as their candidate?
5. Some of the actions of the protestors might be called "political theater." What were these actions? Were the effective or did they fail?

E. Principles Illustrated By the Film:

1. In this clash of political life styles and struggle for power, what did the "Establishment" accomplish in Chicago?
2. What did the "Revolutionaries" accomplish in Chicago?
3. To what extent was a genuine model for an alternative society provided by the protestors?
4. To what extent were the assaults on boundaries successful? To what extent did they fail? Why?

5. Why could not the "chaos of organic development" be tolerated by the officials of the party and the government?
6. If you were Mayor Richard J. Daley and another national convention were to be held in Chicago, what would you do to maintain the boundaries necessary to the status-quo, but to avoid the violent confrontation which occurred in 1968?
7. If you were Abbie Hoffman and wanted to make greater gains in changing the existing system and in developing a viable alternative society, what would you do if another national convention were held in Chicago?

Questions for Further Reflection

1. Compare the McCarthy, Kennedy, Rockefeller, Humphrey, and Nixon campaigns of 1968 in terms of cost, issue-orientation, volunteer involvement, party support, marketing (polls and public relations), strategy, and results. Compare them to presidential campaigns of 2008.

2. Compare the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago to the 2008 Democratic National Convention in Denver.

3. Why were the party platforms important in the convention to the protestors in 1968? Are they as important in 2008 to you?

4. There were non-violent demonstrations at both party conventions in 2008? Why didn't they have the same impact as those shown in the film?

5. What were some of the basic aspects of the "model of an alternative society" shown in the film "Conventions: The Land Around Us?" Is a society built on these concepts possible in the 21st century? What would have to change to make it possible? Is it only a romantic ideal?

6. To what extent were assaults on established boundaries successful in Chicago? To what extent did they fail?

7. If one chooses a radial alternative to society and wants ot challenge the status quo, how can the violence and excesses of a revolution be avoided? How viable is confrontation such as the one occurred I Chicago as a strategy if it is not done as a step along the path to revolution?

8. What are the strongest arguments for supporting traditional politics in the United States? For supporting leaders such as President Lyndon

Johnson, Vice-President Hubert Humphrey, and Mayor Richard J. Daley?

9. What should individuals in the Police Department and the National Guard do when put in this situation?

10. What did the clashes like those at Chicago in 1968 contribute to shaping our world, our society, and our politics today?