

United States: The 1968 Columbia University Student Rebellion

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At 4 am on April 30 [1968], my wife and I stood with tears streaming down our faces on the corner of Amsterdam Avenue and 117th Street, watching the last of the Fayerweather Hall sit-ins being tossed into waiting police vans. We were not the only ones crying, nor were the tears merely those of pity or self-pity. There was also anger, frustration, and actual joy. The incredible—and inevitable—had happened; the “Big Bust” had come. Seven hundred and twenty student and faculty protesters were under arrest; more than 130 had been beaten up, some quite badly. The last illusions about what was happening were shed.

The students' spirit was magnificent. They were singing “We Shall Overcome,” loud and off key, as they waited to be thrown—not carried—into the vans. In the pre-dawn light, a procession of plainclothes cops with beards, long hair, and “student” clothes filed past us toward a police bus, making a weird contrast with the genuine article across the street. Inside the vans, the students continued to demonstrate. While the doors were left open, they sang. When doors were closed, the students banged on the steel walls and rocked the vans chanting, “Strike! Strike!” “V for victory” signs appeared inside the bars. When we shouted across to ask if anyone was hurt, they answered, “Don't worry about us. This is only the beginning,” and made the “V” sign. Despite all the cracked heads, the prevalence of police everywhere, and our evident powerlessness, we sensed that this was profoundly true. That is what brought tears to our eyes. Never, since the civil rights demonstrations of the mid-60s, had we felt such solidarity, such dedication and seriousness of purpose, such reasoned optimism in the face of mere force.

April 30 was in fact a beginning. The end has not yet been written. By 10:00 that morning, the Columbia University Student Council and dozens of student leaders representing a huge majority had come out in favor of a new general student strike, and by noon more than 300 faculty members including many Columbia “stars” had signed a statement condemning the administration and endorsing the new strike. Within 21 hours, a new strike committee had been formed, on the basis of seventy constituents to a delegate, representing everyone from SDS and the members of the five “communes” [groups who occupied five campus buildings] to graduate English students, anthropology majors, and conservatives. On a campus literally saturated by police, where at times even faculty members were refused access, dozens of meetings were taking place to elect delegates, frame demands, devise plans for administrative and curriculum reforms, and set up “liberated” classes. Amid chaos, a new kind of order was taking shape. As the wounded returned from jails and hospitals, the place took on the aura of a veterans hospital. The cracked heads, closed eyes, and

bruised ribs were back on the job, organizing. At this writing, the new strike committee represents upwards of 5,000 students, and the strike, now in its 11th day, appears to be easily 85 percent successful in the college, graduate faculties, and School of General Studies. Moreover, the movement is reaching out in many directions: toward the community, the Poor Peoples March, the underpaid university workers; toward similar movements in the United States, Japan, Western and Eastern Europe; and toward a fresh approach to educational, philosophical, and political problems. Clearly, the strike marks a new beginning.

The Background

Julie Greeman and I attended the regular SDS meeting on April 22, the Monday night before it all began. (SDS has no membership requirements; even people around or over thirty are welcome.) Attendance was poor; the group was divided. A demonstration had been announced for the next day, in response to the administration's attack on the SDS leadership, but no one knew quite what to do. Many felt the group was isolated from the rest of the campus and that a militant action would fall flat and make SDS look ridiculous; they were for holding an educational rally with speeches. An optimistic handful felt Columbia was ripe for "another Berkeley" and presented a detailed scenario of increasingly militant actions for the week to come. None of these suggestions was ever put into practice, though the mood had been correctly gauged. The chairman, Mark Rudd, vacillated between the two positions, and the meeting slowly disintegrated as the members drifted off to crank the mimeo machines. All in all, the meeting was typical, and people who view SDS and the Columbia strike as part of a carefully worked-out conspiracy would do well to sit through such a meeting. Despite the confusion over tactics, however, the three issues were already clear: the Jim Crow Gym, the Institute for Defense Analysis (IDA), and the discipline against student political demonstrators; that is to say, racism, the war, and the right to struggle.

The idea of taking over Morningside Park, the DMZ [1] between Columbia and West Harlem, for a college gym is clearly a case of institutional hubris, followed inevitably by blindness and ultimate catastrophe. The university's concession to community protest—add on a smaller, segregated gym with a separate entrance in the basement for the little black children—was a token gesture perfectly calculated to provoke greater anger. Even when Harlem's elected leaders, the parks commissioner, and the faculty of the School of Architecture protested, University President Grayson Kirk remained adamant. Since the groundbreaking this February, ministers, community leaders, and 26 students have been arrested in a series of non-violent protests—to no avail. As one Professor put it, "Columbia should thank the students, not punish them: they saved us 17 million. If the damn thing had gone up, Harlem would have burned it down anyway."

If the administration was blatant in its de facto racism, it at least tried to hide its complicity in the war machine. On March 23, 1967, Graduate Dean Halford told the troubled faculty, "Columbia has no institutional connection with IDA." A week later, the Columbia Spectator gave him the lie by revealing that Columbia had been a member since 1960 and that Dr. Kirk and Trustee Burden were on the IDA Executive Committee. IDA soon replaced NROTC [2], CIA, and Dow as the symbol of the Vietnam War. On campus there was a three day fast, a petition with 1,000 names, and countless teach-ins and demonstrations. To the indignation of faculty and students over secret napalm, riot-control, and counter-insurgency research going on in their midst, the administration could only reply, "These things are not in the purview of faculty or students," and "Columbia is definitely not a democratic institution."

The issue of "student discipline" (to be distinguished from "student power" [3]) arose out of the issues of war and racism. University President Kirk greeted his returning students last September

with an arbitrary ban on indoor demonstrations aimed as a direct challenge to SDS, which had confronted recruiters from the CIA, Dow, the Marines, and Military Intelligence with great success the year before. With equal arbitrariness, the administration ignored several such indoor protests and then, when 150 students marched into Low Library with a petition of 1,700 against IDA on March 27, singled out Rudd and five other SDS leaders for punishment. Uniform punishment and an open hearing for the "IDA six" became an issue. Meanwhile, 26 others were facing serious criminal charges for attempting to block on-site construction of the gym. The demonstration planned for April 23 was an attempt to pick up the gauntlet so bluntly thrown down by the Kirk administration through a peaceful, if "illegal" mass rally inside Low. The famous Six Demands of SDS (in fact they boil down to three: the gym, IDA, fair discipline) were at once moderate and the culmination of years of more or less peaceful protest in the face of utter arrogance and indifference.

The Strike Begins

What actually happened on Tuesday, April 23, was chaotic and unplanned to say the least. The weather was fine and the SDS rally attracted a good crowd. Mark Rudd read a telegram from University Vice President Truman informing us that Low Library was locked but that he would gladly meet with us for a "dialogue" in a nearby auditorium. Rudd, who had evidently just received the message, seemed genuinely nonplussed. In good old SDS "participatory democracy" fashion, he put the thing to a vote before the somewhat motley assemblage. It was decided that it was a little too late for "dialogue" after so many rebuffs and punishments and, rather futilely, that we should march on Low anyway.

When the head of the march of about 300 reached Low, it was discovered that the doors were, in fact, locked and Rudd stood poised indecisively on a window ledge. Then someone shouted "on to the gym site" and Rudd, after a moment, took up the call.

In fact, only the head of the march ever reached the place, as no one in the back could hear Rudd. A section of the fence was torn down, and a few yards of enemy turf were held for about fifteen minutes in a seesaw pushing match with some precinct cops. One boy got pushed through the police line and was arrested. Then both sides called it a draw, and we marched back to the campus for another mass meeting.

By this time the crowd, the confusion, and the desire for confrontation had all grown, as had our indecision. Since Dr. Truman could no longer be found for "dialogue" and Low was still locked, someone suggested going to Hamilton to confront Columbia College Dean Coleman, and we did. Coleman, however, was not in. He arrived from lunch shortly thereafter, refused to talk, and went into his office while three or four hundred students held a rally in the lobby. (At this point I absented myself for fifty minutes to hold a discussion on Spinoza upstairs, but little had changed when I returned.)

The idea of holding Dean Coleman hostage until the administration agreed to negotiate was never explicitly formulated but seemed to grow out of the situation. I am morally certain that Dean Coleman could have left during the early afternoon without physical harm, though with considerable discomfort and embarrassment. In any case, he himself has never stated that he was actually threatened. He was released without explanation after 25 hours.

As the afternoon drew on, more demonstrators arrived, although classes continued as usual in the occupied building. The black students from the Student Afro-American Society (SAS), who had hitherto just been part of the crowd, took up a station in front of the dean's door while the SDS steering committee went upstairs to try to find out what they were doing. At one point, someone

stuck a microphone in my hand, and I gave a short talk on student movements in Japan, Italy, and Eastern Europe and pointed out that it would be impossible to make a campus revolution while the whole world remained un-free. When I mentioned Czechoslovakia, there was loud applause. By 3 am, most of the white students were asleep, studying, or playing guitars upstairs while SAS held the fort in the lobby. I was not present when, at 5 am, it was decided that SAS alone would stay to occupy the building and that whites should find their own building to sit in.



The SAS decision to go it alone apparently resulted from two causes: the influence of certain Harlem leaders, including nationalists, who visited the building during the night, and the feeling that many of the whites were just along for a lark and would prove fearful, disunited, and undisciplined if a serious attempt were made to hold the building through the next day. (SAS is a very tightly knit group, more like a fraternity than a political society). With considerable bitterness, the whites left and moved to occupy President Kirk's offices in Low. Later that morning, many of them left Low at the rumor of police, thus confirming some of SAS's doubts. The real and magnificent solidarity among the non-SAS students developed only later in the day.

Since this issue of "separatism" is likely to be a sore point, let me at least mention a few circumstantial facts. 1) There were black students in all of the five buildings eventually occupied. 2) Although the administration repeatedly offered amnesty and a separate peace to the SASers in Hamilton (real racism-in-reverse), SAS always refused. 3) When Low was blockaded by counter-demonstrators, it was the blacks in Hamilton who ran in the food. 4) All groups had the same demands. 5) It was the unbeatable offensive-defensive combination of blacks in Hamilton, non-violent white students and faculty standing on the steps as a buffer between them and counter-demonstrators or police, plus the threat of Harlem raging a few blocks to the east that made the first stage of the strike possible.

The Mass Sit-In

Within a day, three more buildings were occupied. Avery, the architecture building, was taken over by graduate architecture students and faculty, who held a marathon "design-in" to plan a new gym and a better Harlem. Avery was never locked or barricaded, and the occupants were totally non-violent. Significantly, it was at Avery that the worst police atrocities, including the deliberate beating of the *Times* reporter, took place a week later. Fayerweather was taken over by a rather heterodox group of graduate and undergraduate students, many sporting McCarthy [4] buttons. Mathematics, the last building to be occupied, was seized by colonists from Low when the latter building became too crowded. There were easily 1,000 sit-in strikers by the end, and more than 720 were actually arrested while many escaped the police raid. The administration deliberately

minimized the strikers' numbers, calling them a "handful." This hypocritical mendacity led to much of the brutality of "Bloody Tuesday," since the police claim they were not prepared for such numbers. They panicked, lost control, and threw in detachments, including the notorious plainclothes squads, who were not properly commanded or briefed for the mission.

Since I was present in the occupied buildings only briefly and as an observer, I will not presume to describe the life in the "communes" that week. I can, however, clarify a few points from my personal knowledge.

1) *Vandalism*: Most of it was perpetrated by the police, both during and after the evacuation of the buildings, as has been documented by films taken on the spot and the testimony of members of the volunteer medical teams and by Dr. Kenneth Clark. The students broke a lamp and pilfered sherry and cigars in Dr. Kirk's office during the early hours of the occupation. They created considerable disorder in his files when they xeroxed private documents on Columbia expansion, corporate relations, and military work. Later, they cleaned up and even vacuumed. They also used furniture in four buildings for barricades, and littered the buildings with sleeping bags, cameras, tape recorders, radios, and so on, most of which disappeared unaccountably after the police raid. There was little or no deliberate damage done.

2) *Coercion*: The sit-in strike, traditional in labor and civil rights movements, is a form of moral and physical coercion. Aside from the ambiguous captivity of Dean Coleman, wisely abandoned after 25 hours, this was the only coercion used. Any assertions to the effect that half-hearted students were bullied into remaining by hop-headed super-revolutionary students or outsiders (sic) are pure fabrications. The comings, goings, and shift in population among buildings were free and collective decisions arrived at through the most lengthy and parliamentary political discussions imaginable.

Here is how it looked from the inside:

During the week in Low I had a strong sense of being part of an historic experience in group living. The self-organization of the 100 people crowded into three rooms was magnificently spontaneous and democratic. Since we lived in relatively crowded quarters, it was impossible to escape the political discussions, which occupied most of our time. The Low communards included experienced radicals of many diverse political tendencies—SDSers, PLers, Trotskyites, Marxist-Humanists, and vanguardists of the Mao/Castro/Che bent—as well as younger students who had little political experience other than in anti-war marches. Yet everyone in Low shared the same basic commitment against the Columbia administration, and everyone eagerly discussed and debated politics and tactics, sharing political experience and forging a political line out of their diverse backgrounds.

Discussion was long, sometimes heated, yet, at the same time, open and democratic. We discussed the significance of amnesty at every meeting, reaffirming our "hard line" to keep up our spirit and to solidify the political position of the other buildings. We discussed the question of access to our windows (we were on the second floor)—a vital point for our survival and for our lines of communication to other buildings—and arrived at the conclusion that the faculty cordon below us represented a threat to our sit-in that stemmed from the faculty's lack of understanding of our political commitment. Discussion on each question lasted about an hour and was followed by a straw vote. If the vote was close, discussion continued longer until a consensus was reached. This process, often maligned as nondemocratic, seems to me to have been completely democratic in that decisions were arrived at by everyone agreeing and sticking to a position that came out of lengthy debates in which parliamentary procedure was less important than political and tactical correctness.

In between debates, the Low communards continued talking, playing cards, singing, and getting to know each other. Our openness and spontaneity of debate carried over into the mundane tasks of

eating and cleaning up. We ate twice a day and cleaned up our living quarters before each meal. Everyone pitched in to these tasks, and no leaders were needed to tell people to work. Far from being vandals, the Low communards were careful not to destroy Dr. Kirk's office. Furniture was moved to barricade doors, a vase was accidentally broken, Dr. Kirk's cigars and tobacco were sampled, but great care was taken not to destroy property wantonly. In fact, one of our excellent technicians fixed Dr. Kirk's Xerox machine and repaired the telephone switchboard, which the Campus Security Police had ripped out on the first day of occupation. Any broken furniture or torn books did not result from vandalism on the part of demonstrators in Low; the damage done to Dr. Kirk's offices was caused by police axes in their attempt to discredit our protest.

The freeness, spontaneity, sense of political commitment, camaraderie, and democratic atmosphere among the 100 demonstrators in Low was the most beautiful part of my experience. There are thousands of incidents which come to mind now which might make my description of what went on clearer: the fact that 100 shared one bathroom and cheerfully waited on long lines to use it; or the fact that each day a new rumor about cops sent us into short-lived panic until we all realized that worrying about these rumors did no good, whereas joking about them did pass the time. But the spirit and sense of disciplined political commitment shared by the Low communards is best shown by the actions just before, during, and immediately after the Big Bust.

We heard the bust was coming at about 12:30 Tuesday morning. Our reaction was not to panic but to sit down and have a last political discussion about how to face the cops. We affirmed our earlier agreement to resist by barricading the windows and doors and by standing together with arms linked—all of us together in one room. Several comrades wanted to resist more actively in another room. We affirmed our guiding principle that all must act as one or not at all; thus our more militant friends were asked to leave. After they reaffirmed their solidarity with us and our commitment, and after each of us personally shook each of their hands or embraced them, the few militant comrades went out a window to join the crowd below to try to fight the cops. The rest of us linked arms and began singing, "We Shall Overcome," "Solidarity Forever," and, finally, "We Shall Not Be Moved." We sang verses of this last song for a half hour while the cops used axes on the barricaded doors.

The TPF [Tactical Police Force or "riot squad"] entered the room and for 15 minutes stood dazed watching us swaying in our circle of linked arms singing, "Cops don't scare us. We shall not be moved. ... We're black and white together. ... We'll be back tomorrow" and so on. Then Sid Davidoff, Mayor Lindsay's peace-maker cop-tamer, asked us over a bull-horn to leave without arrests. We drowned his voice with our singing, and the TPF went to work. The cops ripped us one by one from our circle. They pulled hair, arms, heads, or clubbed people down then kicked, clubbed, or punched us along a meticulously arranged gauntlet of cops. The gauntlet was about 100 yards long, with each cop getting his shot at each of us. Once past the line, we re-formed our circle, and although we were weary, injured, and bloody, we faced the TPF again and began singing, "Cops don't scare us ... We'll be back tomorrow ... We shall not be moved." After a night in jail in which we agitated the cops about our political moral principles, we were all back on campus pushing to broaden and deepen our struggle at Columbia, which had now become a general strike.

Amnesty

Many people cannot understand why the students were adamant on this question. I, myself, had doubts until the political implications came clear. Most of the faculty, although sympathetic to the students' objectives, balked both at their tactics and insistence on amnesty; hence the ambiguous role of the ad hoc faculty group as mediators. In time, however, the implications became clear.

1) The students had, for years, exhausted legal means of protest and been rebuffed. The administration had taught them that only these “illegal” means would work. Hence, if one accepted the goals, one had to accept the tactics and the demand for amnesty.

2) The rules broken were arbitrarily made and unilaterally applied by the administration, a party to the dispute. Hence, the legitimacy of the proposed punishment was questionable.

3) Practically, there were only two alternatives: amnesty or the cops. By the weekend the vast majority of previously uncommitted students had seen this and chosen amnesty (signified by a green armband). The failure of the ad hoc faculty group to face this basic choice was its fundamental weakness, despite the sincerity, personal bravery, and genuine concern of its members.

The Big Bust

Since I had the dubious privilege of being the first victim of “excessive” police force (four stitches) at Columbia during the first, and abortive, police raid during the early hours of Friday, April 26, I may speak with some authority. I was clubbed by a plainclothes cop for the “crime” of asking his identity and business in front of Low Library while I was part of a non-violent faculty peace-keeping contingent that included many department chairs and full professors. Vice President Truman personally witnessed the results of this attack and expressed regret and amazement at what had happened. Although he expressed similar regret and amazement at the 130 hospitalized students, faculty, and clergy brutalized five days later under his and Dr. Kirk’s orders, his credibility is somewhat less forceful the second time around.

While the clearing of Hamilton was done without any brutality (thanks to the threat of Harlem over the hill), the indiscriminate beatings, stomping, and clubbing of non-resisters, passive resisters, and spectators elsewhere was appalling. I will not tell my horror stories; the National Lawyers’ Guild has hundreds on file for those interested and there are films and photos as well. A few remarks will suffice. The university and its health service made absolutely no provision for any eventuality. Volunteer medical teams were denied access to the wounded by the police, as were clergy (the Rabbi was beaten worst of all), and a medical station in South Field was overrun. The worst injuries were sustained by spectators, including pro-police counter-demonstrators, when South Field, an open space 100 yards from the occupied buildings, was “cleared” (actually, the people were herded into a closed corner and then beaten). Many uniformed police covered their shields; the plainclothes cops wore no identifying marks (some were disguised as hippies) and were the most vicious. Neither our “cool” mayor, nor our “humanist” chief inspector, nor Drs. Kirk and Truman should be allowed to forget or live down the spectacle of all those bloody headed youngsters.

Yet brutality is not the issue at Columbia. The students, even those who never believed in police brutality before they experienced it, now understand it as integral to the society of war, racism, and administrative rule they live in. Even the demand for Kirk and Truman’s resignation was dropped after 21 hours. The issues remain: restructuring the university to provide for student and faculty voice in decisions, amnesty, the gym, IDA, no criminal charges, and the creation of a judicial committee on student discipline. They are hardly revolutionary; most progressive colleges have most or all. Yet the strike goes on and the administration remains basically inflexible, refusing to recognize the strike committee and proclaiming “business as usual.”

The students have changed, though. I can feel it when I meet my “liberated” classes. I, too, have been liberated—freed from the vile position of being a policeman to take attendance, give letter grades, push students through a required curriculum, demand conformity. I feel more like a scholar reading good books with younger scholars—which is what I hope I am. Students have also changed

politically and philosophically. They are struggling to overcome the split between theory and practice, as well as the split between intellectual and manual worker. They are feeling and understanding the events in Poland, Mississippi, West Berlin, Paris, Harlem, and Czechoslovakia in a new way—from the inside. At last the world has come to Columbia. And the ripples coming out from Columbia into the world are yet to be felt.

Many people cannot understand why the students were adamant on this question. I, myself, had doubts until the political implications came clear. Most of the faculty, although sympathetic to the students' objectives, balked both at their tactics and insistence on amnesty; hence the ambiguous role of the ad hoc faculty group as mediators. In time, however, the implications became clear. 1) The students had, for years, exhausted legal means of protest and been rebuffed. The administration had taught them that only these "illegal" means would work. Hence, if one accepted the goals, one had to accept the tactics and the demand for amnesty. 2) The rules broken were arbitrarily made and unilaterally applied by the administration, a party to the dispute. Hence, the legitimacy of the proposed punishment was questionable. 3) Practically, there were only two alternatives: amnesty or the cops. By the weekend the vast majority of previously uncommitted students had seen this and chosen amnesty (signified by a green armband). The failure of the ad hoc faculty group to face this basic choice was its fundamental weakness, despite the sincerity, personal bravery, and genuine concern of its members.

At this writing, the original IDA six, the 26 gym protesters, and seven hundred others still face criminal charges and university discipline for their political role. Amnesty is still an issue.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] 1. DMZ: Demilitarized Zone. An ironic reference to the supposedly neutral territory that separated North and South Vietnam just as Morningside Park separated the races and classes of Manhattan's West Side.

[2] NROTC: The Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps conducted on-campus training of Columbia students, who often attended their non-military classes in uniform.

[3] "Student power," the demand for student participation in curriculum and institutional planning, was not an issue in the strike. It came up later, as a liberal sop to the newly radicalized.

Our issue was students' right to political expression on campus without facing expulsion.

[4] In 1968 anti-war Senator Eugene McCarthy was seeking the Democratic presidential nomination and was the "white hope" of the liberals. Radical students were encouraged to go "clean for Gene" by shaving their beards and campaigning in the primaries. McCarthy was pushed aside by the pro-war Democrats, and disillusioned youth rioted at the Democratic Convention in Chicago that August.