

Meet the Grandchildren of the '60s

College students in the streets protesting a Trump presidency are not so very different from the demonstrators who took over Columbia University in April 1968. Nevertheless, what took place in less than three weeks back then did a lot to mold the present.

On April 9, 1968, at a memorial service for Martin Luther King Jr., 20-year-old Mark Rudd, president of Columbia's Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), grabbed the microphone to denounce Grayson L. Kirk, the university's conservative president. Columbia bordered Harlem, where it had recently acquired land to build a new gymnasium. Rudd accused Kirk of racism for building a gym to serve Columbia's wealthy and predominantly white student body at Harlem's expense. He also lambasted Columbia for supporting the war in Vietnam by acquiring grants from the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) to study military strategy.

For 20 days, Rudd channeled passion into idealism to fuse issues of race with frustrations over Vietnam. On Tuesday, April 23, several hundred students seized the library. After venturing out and failing to bring down a fence around the gym construction site, some protesters returned to the library while others occupied the administration building. Two days later, over 1,000 students and off-campus supporters were ensconced in five university buildings. Protesters came together and then clustered around causes. Banners marked off various "liberated zones." The hardcore revolutionaries—advocating violence—wore red armbands. Those urging nonviolence wore green. Black Panthers hung Huey Newton posters. SDS favored images of Karl Marx, Che Guevara and Vladimir Lenin.

On Thursday, April 25, black students and allies from Harlem demanded white occupiers leave the administration building. Mark Rudd and SDS moved to Kirk's office in the occupied library. On Monday night, April 29, over 1,000 New York City police swarmed the campus. By dawn, 720 students were in custody and 148 people were hospitalized.

Columbia marked the height of the "Sixties" movement. The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) expelled whites in 1965. The Black Panthers, founded in Alabama by SNCC the same year, morphed into a sexist and racist separatist movement. After Columbia, Mark Rudd and student colleague Ted Gold split from SDS to found the radical and violent Weather Underground. On March 6, 1970, Gold and two other Weathermen perished when a bomb they were making exploded prematurely. Weather Underground leaders Mark Rudd, Bernadine Dohrn and Bill Ayers went underground. Dohrn and Ayers eventually married. Later they supported the political aspirations of Chicago activist Barack Obama.

Rudd became one of the charter members of the 2008 group, Progressives for Obama, the mission statement of which was written by SDS founder Tom Hayden.

Images of protesting students, police brutality, and Tom Hayden's appeal for creating "two, three, many Columbias" mobilized young people on other campuses in the '60s. SDS went on to Chicago, where with Yippies and hippies, they sparked mayhem that contributed to putting Richard Nixon in the White House. Radicals then captured the Democratic Party to support Senator George McGovern's presidential candidacy leading to near political seppuku in 1972.

The May 1970 campus eruptions—protesting four deaths at Kent State—more closely resembles what's happening now with the grandchildren of the Sixties generation. Then, as now, there indeed were "many Columbias." What difference did it—or does it—make?

Back then, not much. Columbia caved. It didn't build the gym and cut off relations with IDA. In 1968, like most of American academe, Columbia was still conservative. But pressure on administrators was growing so that by June 1969, 80 major colleges and universities were seeking new presidents. Unable to stand up to demands issued by students and, increasingly by faculties, college and university administrators tried accommodation. This allowed a generation of Sixties-inspired radicals to move into academia where they thrived while instilling their leftist ideological perspectives. Only a handful of institutions, mostly in the South, held the line, at least for a while. Today only a few academically rigorous conservative colleges and universities remain: Grove City College, Hillsdale College and Pepperdine University are among them.

America's war in Vietnam ground along until January 1973. Richard Nixon's troop withdrawals, made possible by massive bombing coupled to Henry Kissinger's deft diplomacy, contributed far more to ending U.S. involvement than protesters ever did. In the 1980s, the "'68ers" twice elected Ronald Reagan. Our kids are the helicopter parents who coddled the 20-somethings rioting today.

Columbia was the first real media-driven student protest event. Sporadic, short-lived campus disturbances usually took place in college towns with limited media coverage. The Columbia unrest lasted three weeks. The press honed in because it involved pampered white children from upper middle class to wealthy New York/New England families. *The New York Times* covered it. Major newspapers from Philadelphia to San Francisco dispatched reporters from their New York City offices. Camera crews from the three TV networks rode the subway to Columbia to provide coverage.

The current children's crusade will rock on through Inauguration Day 2017. Then the kids will return to school, maybe learn something, and hopefully grow up. {eo}

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