

Columbia University's Gym Crow: Race and the Protests of April 1968

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### Introduction

In an April 10, 1968 letter to the editor in the *Columbia Spectator*, the Student Afro American Society condemned the university for its “insincere and ineffective” response to Martin Luther King’s assassination. Columbia had cancelled classes for the day following the assassination, but this was, in the eyes of SAS, “merely a symbolic act.” Their palpable disgust with the university was accompanied by an indictment of largely white institutions across America. “White racism killed Dr. King,” said the letter, which was not signed by any individual. “Until the University and other institutions change many of their basic policies there will be no end to racial animosity and violence.” These white institutions, they said, neglected to meet the needs of the black people in their communities, and it was leading to violence and inequality. They then suggested five ways in which the university could improve upon its policies, including establishing a basic course on African-American history and adding black faculty.<sup>1</sup>

Two months earlier, on February 14, Ted Gold, vice chairman of Columbia’s chapter of the national liberal group Students for a Democratic Society, condemned the *Spectator* for classifying an instance of police brutality as “alleged.” He said that the *Spectator*’s so-called neutrality was “evidence not of impartiality, but distortion.” He finished his letter with a lofty quote from the philosopher Herbert Marcuse: “Tolerance is an end in it self only when it is truly universal, practiced by the rulers as well as by the ruled, by the lords as well as by the peasants, by the sheriffs as well as by their victims.” From the content of their letters to the editor, it appears that SDS and SAS actively worked toward the same goal of racial equality, but the

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<sup>1</sup> Student’s Afro-American Society, “Insincerity and Ineffectiveness,” *Columbia Spectator* (New York, NY), April 10, 1968.

rhetoric used in the two letters embodies the unbridgeable gap between both the means and the ends of the two groups.<sup>2</sup>

Attendees of Columbia in the 1960s would later complain that SDS was too wrapped up in its own pretentious language. They complained that SDS was unable to connect with the values they purported to represent.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, SAS's letter focuses on institutional racism and tolerance of discrimination at Columbia, and how in a more macro sense, that indicates trends in America. SDS's letter is about a hodgepodge of issues—racism, journalistic integrity, tolerance, and freedom of speech.

The two groups, both liberal student groups, never intersected until April 1968, when for one week, students from both groups, bolstered and supported by students who did not belong to either organization, occupied five buildings on campus. These protests have comfortably settled as a point of pride in Columbia's collective memory, memorialized as an example of Columbia's position as a progressive, liberal, Ivy League university. *Bwog*, a popular student publication, tags stories about activism as "the spirit of 1968,"<sup>4</sup> and the 120<sup>th</sup> Annual Varsity Show, a yearly student-written musical that lampoons current events at Columbia, had a song entitled "The Spirit of 1968." Students embrace this part of the university's history, when liberal students came together to halt the construction of a racist gym in Morningside Heights. This retelling implies that students conquered racial divisions to unite and fight the proverbial man. The protests were far more complicated and the actual events and relations between the two groups negate the

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<sup>2</sup> Ted Gold, "A Question of Impartiality," *Columbia Spectator* (New York, NY) February 21, 1968.

<sup>3</sup> Frédéric Robert, "The Rhetoric of Social Movements: Differential Images of the Recruitment in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), 1960-1965," *Revue française d'études américaines*, no. 99 (2004): 85-102, accessed April 9, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20875484>.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Wagner, "From the Issue: Dissent Since '68," *Bwog*, accessed April 10, 2015. <http://bwog.com/2011/03/27/from-the-issue-dissent-since-68/>

claim that the events reflect the liberal spirit at Columbia – indeed, in New York, at the time. Closer examination of the protests reveals disparities and disagreements between the white- and black factions, severe racial tensions, in fact.

When asked, a person casually acquainted with Columbia history would probably say that the protests were in response to the proposed gym project. To be sure, the gym was a highly controversial endeavor. The proposed site was in Morningside Park, public property that theoretically and legally should be left available and open to the public. Even more controversial, the public (largely black) would have a separate, limited entrance several floors below the main entrance, the entrance intended for students (largely white).<sup>5</sup>

This may have been less a racist decision than what Robert McCaughey calls a “topographical reality,”<sup>6</sup> as Morningside Park is on a steep hill, with Columbia at the top of the hill on the west side and the neighborhood at the bottom to the east. But black students, who already felt oppressed and subjugated by the university, did not believe this was the case. They worked to temporarily halt university functioning because of what they saw as deeply entrenched, insidious racism that prevented them from ever being valued members of the community. The goal was not to topple the university, but to restructure it.

Liberal white students, some of whom were in SDS, some of whom were not, protested for a wider variety of reasons. The white students were concerned about this “Gym Crow,” but they were also also concerned with Columbia’s involvement with the Institute for Defense Analyses during the Vietnam War, and hoped that in protesting, they would cause Columbia to withdraw support for what the left saw as an unnecessary massacre of American soldiers and Vietnamese soldiers and civilians. They also wanted a promise from the university that there

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<sup>5</sup> Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 435.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

would not be disciplinary action for protests that had taken place earlier that year when they protested the presence of military recruiters on campus.

To say the protests were a case of the students versus the university would be an oversimplification. In many ways, the protests were also the students versus the students. Black and white students initially convened on Columbia's college walk to protest together, but sixteen hours later, they had split entirely, with the black students telling the white students to leave the building they were occupying and find their own buildings. Although their separate protests followed similar trajectories—occupation, and, subsequently, arrest—everything about how the two groups of students proceeded differed.

Contemporaries who were not associated with the university beheld the protesters in a different light, split along racial lines. In many primary and secondary reports of the protests, white protesters are referred to as just that—white protesters. Black students, on the other hand, are called “militants.”<sup>7</sup> This is indicative of way people saw black people as threatening, even though by all reports they were more organized, more peaceful, and less destructive than the white students in the four other buildings. Although the protests were part of one whole, the different ways of referring to protesters divided those involved along racial lines. Even if it was unconscious, contemporaries held racist views.

While the protests reflect racial divisions, there were other tensions at Columbia. There were plenty of Columbia students who thought the protests were damaging and unnecessary, and women were often excluded from conversations about activism at Columbia entirely, even

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Naison, *White Boy: A Memoir*. “Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 2002”, 90–95.

though students at the all-women's Barnard College across the street participated in the protests as well.<sup>8</sup>

Columbia in 1968 was especially ripe for protests on such a massive scale. There were many famous protests on college campuses in the 1960s, including ones at Berkeley and Cornell.<sup>9</sup> 1968 was a troubled year. Popularity for Lyndon Baines Johnson plummeted; the Tet Offensive led to the public's almost total loss of faith in the Vietnam War; and then Martin Luther King was assassinated on a balcony in Tennessee. America was still coming to terms with of a number of new bills that changed the social landscape of the country. The Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act primed black citizens to expect more from their government and from their country. Additionally, a small but growing black population at formerly all-white universities and colleges began to demand rights. At Columbia, black students existed in a white enclave within a much larger black community, and this resulted in dramatic action. The protests were not only about the students' demands, but were rather a climactic moment in which general violence, protests, and dissatisfaction converged at Columbia.

Several books have analyzed the Columbia protests, but most of these books have not addressed the split between black and white protesters. This thesis will show the deep racial tensions that underlay the protests. Chapter one will address the events that preceded the protests, and examine why Columbia in 1968 was a perfect storm for the events that followed, paying special attention to the racial divides that characterized Columbia in the 1960s. Chapter two will discuss what happened during the protests, and how the behavior and experiences of the black

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<sup>8</sup> Janet Price, interview with author, October 15, 2014, transcript.

<sup>9</sup> Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS: The Rise and Development of the Students for a Democratic Society* (Random House, 1973).



protesters diverged from that of the white protesters. Chapter three will look at the aftermath and how the protesters' demands were met or rejected.

One difficulty with outlining the differences between the white experience and the black experience is the lack of accounts from the students in Hamilton Hall, the building on the southeast corner of campus that the black students occupied. There were far fewer black students than white students, so the body of material is smaller to begin with. Black students gave few interviews about the events, immediately after or in subsequent years. To get through their silence, to tease out their experience and perspective, the sources need to be read "against the grain."<sup>10</sup> This was the approach I had to take in order to create a narrative as SAS may have described it. The language used by those who did report took on a crucial role in my research.

The protests defined Columbia for years following their conclusion. This paper examines the selective, collective memory loss about the racial tensions between even the most liberal of protesters.

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<sup>10</sup> Carole A. Myscofski, "Against the Grain: Learning and Teaching" (Lecture, DuPont Awards for Teaching Excellence, Illinois Wesleyan University, IL, April 2001). A phrase coined (in this context) by Myscofski, meaning to seek information about those whose ideas and words are not readily available. Myscofski writes that in order to find information about subjugated groups in her field of study (the Spanish Inquisition), she had to struggle "against the assumptions, perspectives, and categories created by the Inquisitors and [listen] to the odd phrases, grammatically incorrect sentences, and unique explanations embedded in the texts [in order to] find the truth as seen by the accused, running counter to the truths created by the Inquisitors."

## Chapter 1: Racial tensions in America, New York, and Columbia through April 1968

The 1960s were tumultuous and contradictory. The liberalism of the decade associated with Woodstock, hippies, civil rights, and the emergence of the birth control pill, emerged in response to the general tumult, and also in opposition to a deeply entrenched conservatism that permeated aspects of American life in the 1950s, a decade that saw less women in the workplace and the Red Scare. Following the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, Lyndon Baines Johnson ascended to the presidency. Johnson, a Texas Democrat, was viewed as brash and pushy, a departure from the urbane JFK. He delivered what he called the “state of my union” address and was known for the “Johnson Treatment,” in which he would forcefully coerce other politicians in order to move forward his legislation.<sup>11</sup> A polarizing figure to his constituents, Johnson was responsible for an enormous amount of domestic legislation. Under the direction of Kennedy, meaningful civil rights action fell by the wayside. Kennedy, who campaigned on a moderate platform regarding civil rights, faced a conservative congress unwilling to affect change. Even Martin Luther King indicated that he might prefer to vote for Nixon.<sup>12</sup> Johnson, who assumed the presidency after the assassination of Kennedy, was what historian Mark Stern calls a “coincident hero.” He pursued a much more aggressive pathway to civil rights.<sup>13</sup> Most notably, he signed into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Black communities found these laws to be diluted and ineffective, and it destroyed their faith in

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<sup>11</sup> Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1976).

<sup>12</sup> John Hart, “Kennedy, Congress, and Civil Rights,” *Journal of American Studies*, 13, No 2 (1979): 165-178, accessed March 12, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27553692>.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Tushnet, “Calculating Visions: Kennedy, Johnson, and Civil Rights by Mark Stern,” *The American Historical Review*, 97, No 5 (1992), 1624-1625, accessed March 12, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2166133>

the white liberal establishment. The laws had many loopholes and many states enforced them tepidly, if at all. But for constituents who did not feel they had anything to gain from increased civil rights, the move toward mandated integration was radical and unprecedented. By 1965, much to the chagrin of most white southerners and many white northerners, schools were integrating, towns relaxed voting laws, and the enfranchisement of racial minorities became a legal priority across the nation.

Equally as controversial were Johnson's actions in Vietnam. Johnson steadily escalated military presence in Vietnam even after promising to end the war. The longer the United States stayed in Vietnam, and the more military action escalated, the more controversial the war became. Gallup polls show that only 23% of Americans thought it was a mistake to send troops to Vietnam in 1965. By the end of Johnson's presidency, in September 1968, 54% of Americans thought it was a mistake.<sup>14</sup> As Americans became more and more puzzled as to why the most powerful army in the world could not defeat guerilla troops of a much poorer nation, Johnson quickly lost support, and did not seek a second reelection.

The liberal movement found a home on college campuses, a fertile ground for such activities due to the young age of attendees and the spreading of new ideas. Students for a Democratic Society began to gain traction on the national political scene in 1962, with the writing of the Port Huron Statement. Originally drafted by Tom Hayden, the document called for participatory democracy, nonviolent civil disobedience, and disarmament. It was indicative of many of the beliefs of the New Left, mainly in its opposition to the military's acquisition of new arms and to the racial violence across the country. The Port Huron Statement ends with the declaration that universities are an "overlooked seat of influence" and that much of the change

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<sup>14</sup> "Iraq versus Vietnam: A comparison of public opinion," *Gallup*, February 25, 2015, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/18097/iraq-versus-vietnam-comparison-public-opinion.aspx>

the statement calls for can take place in the laps of research institutions across the country.<sup>15</sup> The document states, “Social relevance, the accessibility to knowledge, and internal openness—these together make the university a potential base and agency in a movement of social change.”

Chapters of SDS across the country protested the war and civil rights issues of the 1960s.

Columbia, though far removed from national headlines (at least before April 1968) found itself entrenched in civil rights and the Vietnam War in the months and years leading up to the protests. The 1960s are often thought of as a liberal, progressive time, and Columbia is often thought of as a liberal, progressive place. This reputation does not hold up when it comes to racial tensions at Columbia and military entanglements of the university.

By 1964, there were already forty chapters of SDS nationally. Students did not establish a chapter at Columbia until April 1965. It was the fifty-second chapter of SDS. John Fuerst, CC '67 and acting chair of SDS, told the *Columbia Spectator* that the group would exist to “fill the void in the political left at Columbia.”<sup>16</sup> In 1967, there were about 100 active members of the Columbia Young Republicans,<sup>17</sup> and several other organizations, including the Columbia Conservative Union and Young Americans for Freedom, had significant memberships of fifty and above.<sup>18</sup> Campus had a diversity in political opinions, and it would be false to suggest that Columbia was more liberal in character than other universities of similar size and demographics. SDS arrived with little pomp and circumstance, and did not begin appearing regularly in

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<sup>15</sup> Tom Hayden. *The Port Huron statement: the visionary call of the 1960s revolution*. (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005).

<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey Newman, “CU Students Organize Chapter of National Liberal Group,” *Columbia Daily Spectator* (New York, NY), April 22, 1965.

<sup>17</sup> Oren Root, “‘Moderates’ From New Group, Split from Young Republicans,” *Columbia Daily Spectator* (New York, NY), May 2, 1967.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Van Nes, “Conservatively New Desk on Low Plaza Heralds Emergence of CU Rightists,” *Columbia Daily Spectator* (New York, NY), April 29, 1966.

Spectator articles until about a year later. The chapter remained small through April 1968, by which point they had about fifty core members, almost all white males.<sup>19</sup>

The number of black students on campus increased throughout the sixties to fifty students at Columbia College and forty students at Barnard College.<sup>20</sup> The resistance to and suspicion of these new additions did not decrease with time. A November 1967 Columbia Spectator article on the new black freshman in the fall semester said, “[They] have essentially bourgeois material goals tempered by a more militant sense of racial identity and a refusal to ‘compromise with a basically white college environment.’”<sup>21</sup> The article aimed to criticize black students in general with little to no evidence under the guise of journalism. No op-ed or letter to the editor rebutted or challenged the article, which serves to confirm the very alienation the article describes. The New Left was anti-bourgeois (although many of them were middle class) so it was an insult, and perhaps revealed discomfort with the idea of middle class black people. Additionally, the appearance of the word “militant” shows that the author associated the general black population with violence and extremism. The perceived “refusal to compromise” (the author is vague about what the black students were not compromising about) showed that no matter how much black students tried to blend in and be a part of the community, the community would find a way to criticize them. In 1967, Columbia’s humor magazine wrote that the formation of a black fraternity was “trying to provide Negro students with a home away from home, a sort of haven

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<sup>19</sup> Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 429.

<sup>20</sup> Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 426.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Stern, “Negro Freshmen Appear to Be Less Militant,” *Columbia Daily Spectator* (New York, NY), November 1, 1967

for the noble savages in this world of chrome and glass.”<sup>22</sup> The racist phrase “noble savages” suggests that black people did not belong at Columbia. Many white students, this would suggest, liberals and conservatives alike, did not actively seek to bridge gaps between themselves and their new, black classmates.

Barnard College, Columbia’s sister school, had begun admitting black students in 1924, with the admission of Zora Neale Hurston, anthropologist and author of the lauded 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.<sup>23</sup> Columbia admitted black students as early as 1903, when Pixley ka Isaka Seme, the founder of the South African ANC, started his bachelor’s degree.<sup>24</sup> Seme was the exception, not the rule, though, and it wasn’t until the 1960s that Columbia began a push to admit more black students. Between 1964 and 1965, the number of black applicants to Barnard, Columbia’s sister school, a women’s college directly across the street, tripled, though the attendees were a tiny minority, at around 5% of the total population of the school.<sup>25</sup> Students were recruited from a variety of different socioeconomic backgrounds, and of the black students who would later be arrested in Hamilton Hall, 55 percent came from working class backgrounds and 85 percent received financial aid.<sup>26</sup>

Columbia wasn’t legally segregated, but as in many places, de facto segregation remained the norm as people adjusted to a diverse environment. There was not a single black full professor at Columbia in 1963. In 1972, Kellis E. Parker became the first black law professor at Columbia,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibram H. Rogers, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965-1972* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2012) 90.

<sup>23</sup> “Archeology of a Classic: Celebrating Zora Neale Hurston ‘28,” *Barnard.edu*, December 17, 2012, <https://barnard.edu/news/archaeology-classic-celebrating-zora-neale-hurston-28>.

<sup>24</sup> “Pixley ka Isaka Seme,” *overcomingapartheid.msu.edu*, accessed April 12, 2015, <http://overcomingapartheid.msu.edu/people.php?id=65-251-81>

<sup>25</sup> “Barnard Takes More Negroes in 1969 Class,” *Columbia Daily Spectator* (New York, NY), May 3, 1965

<sup>26</sup> Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 654.

and it wasn't until decades later that Carl Hart became the first tenured black professor in the sciences at Columbia.<sup>27</sup> In interviews conducted years later, black alumni confirmed a sense of alienation when they were students. Black men were sometimes stopped and searched by campus security on their way into class, and a class was offered to black men on how to speak the King's English.<sup>28</sup> This reveals a mistrust of black men and a disdain for black culture and language. Students described lunch tables segregated by race, and every black student was "randomly" paired with a black roommate.<sup>29</sup> In such a small environment, it would simply be too much of a coincidence for every black student to somehow accidentally be matched with a black roommate. Ironically, when ten black freshmen tried to form a chapter of a historically black fraternity, Omega Psi Phi, the administration said that the fraternity was segregationist.<sup>30</sup> Although an effort was made to admit black students, once they were there, their difference was reinforced. On the other hand, however, Columbia prevented them from creating an environment that would provide support.

Two political groups on campus, the aforementioned Students for a Democratic Society and the Student Afro-American Society, exemplified the divide in circumstances and ideology between white and black students. Prior to April 1968, the radical white students in SDS and the increasing number of black students did not interact socially or in terms of their agendas.

SAS formed in fall 1964 as a forum for discussion of African American problems. Founding member Hilton Clark told the *New York Times*, "There is a great deal of apathy among educated, or so-called [sic] Ivy League, Negroes to our race's continuing struggle. They

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<sup>27</sup> Ibram H. Rogers, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965-1972* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2012) 27.

<sup>28</sup> Karla Spurlock, interview by Michelle Patrick, 2011, Class of 1971 Oral History Collection, Barnard College Archives.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Mark Naison, *White Boy: A Memoir* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 71.

are losing identification with the masses of Negroes who are far below them educationally and economically.” Clark told the *Times* that SAS was “not a social action group.” He explained that apathy was evident among Negroes at Columbia of all backgrounds. He then elaborated, “The Northern Negro, perhaps well-to-do with a prep school education, has experienced only the more subtle forms of discrimination and begins to get used to them. He feels he has little in common with the great majority of his race. On the other hand, the Southern Negro, who is probably poorer and may even have come from segregated schools, finds things so much better here that he doesn't see the subtle forms of discrimination. He begins to lose interest in the struggle.”<sup>31</sup> This complicates the narrative further, with divisions at Columbia not just between white and black but also between black and black.

By 1968, the group had diverged from its original intentions and was engaged in activism on campus. Many of these black students saw it as their responsibility to give back to the community from which many of them came. The issues they chose to take on, as reported by the *Columbia Spectator*, were not domestic policies or international politics, and had to do with injustices in the Columbia and Harlem community. In 1967, SAS presented a list of demands to the manager of food services regarding the alleged mistreatment of food service workers, many of them black.<sup>32</sup>

SAS remained a social organization even as it expanded into social action. Michelle Patrick, BC '72, said, “SAS really amounted to an organization that basically had tea, and you'd

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<sup>31</sup> “Negro students fighting apathy” *New York Times* (New York, NY), December 20, 1964.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Stern, “SAS Urges Better Working Conditions In Food Services,” *Columbia Spectator* (New York, NY), April 17 1967.



go to the tea, and you'd meet your date for the next weekend or something."<sup>33</sup> Interracial dating between Columbia and Barnard students was unheard of, and SAS provided a space to meet people. A *Spectator* op-ed said that "SAS intended to make the Negro proud of the fact he was a Negro."<sup>34</sup> This was an important support system for a group of people who felt marginalized by the organization they attended.

Meanwhile, to this point, Columbia SDS's pet cause had been Columbia's collaboration with the Institute for Defense Analyses. The IDA existed so that the leading universities in the country, in conjunction with the government, could contribute their findings on weaponry, ostensibly to the military. It was not a secret that Columbia was heavily involved in the IDA, and therefore involved in the creation of weapons that could pulverize Vietnam. As the birthplace of the Manhattan Project, Columbia already had a history of involvement with dangerous and highly lethal weapon-making.<sup>35</sup>

SDS became enraged over the IDA in April 1967 when they learned that the University had not disclosed its affiliation with the Institute for several years. President Kirk defended the practice in the *Columbia Spectator*, saying that the affiliation was due to "the need of the federal government, in scientific fields, to attract talent of the highest order."<sup>36</sup> The implication was that without the know-how of the brains behind a top research facility, the nation could not triumph in Vietnam. A spokesman for SDS told the *Spectator* that the group opposed any organization's

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<sup>33</sup> Michelle Patrick, interview by Bob Solomon, 2011, Class of 1971 Oral History Collection, Barnard College Archives.

<sup>34</sup> "Black Identity—Why Not?" *Columbia Spectator* (New York, NY), April 26, 1967.

<sup>35</sup> Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 438.

<sup>36</sup> "Kirk States CU Will Remain Member of Defense Institute," *Columbia Spectator* (New York, NY) May 1, 1967.

presence on campus if the organization's policy actively or passively encouraged war.<sup>37</sup> In the fall of 1968, the confrontational Mark Rudd, who delivered petitions demanding that the university cease and desist this relationship, led the chapter. SDS also made civil rights their cause, but it was not a priority the way it was for SAS. The issues that interested the two groups—civil rights and the war—reflected the politics LBJ had to contend with.

If the number of newspaper articles is any indication, SDS had a much larger presence on campus, though not many more members. It is also possible that SDS had greater access to the student newspaper, or a greater interest in publishing their arguments. Regardless, the issues facing the university, in the collective eyes of the groups, were very different. While SAS championed the rights of food service workers in the dining hall in March 1967, a hundred white students protested the presence of CIA recruiters on campus. The next month, five hundred students protested the presence of Marine Corps recruiters on campus. Obviously most of these students were not SDS students, but SDS put several ads in the *Spectator* calling for the protests and was a force behind spearheading the effort.<sup>38</sup> SDS spoke about civil rights in its meetings and occasionally published op-eds about racism in the *Spectator*, but civil rights was one issue among many for them.

It was the construction of a new gym in the neighboring Morningside Park that paralyzed campus with racial tensions. The Morningside Heights community surrounding Columbia was 90% white in 1950, but ten years later, the number had declined to 79% as both the black and Puerto Rican populations exploded. Heroin was a major problem and single-room occupancy

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<sup>37</sup> "Targets of SDS Will Include Any Defense-Oriented Agency," *Columbia Spectator* (New York, NY) March 16, 1967.

<sup>38</sup> Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 439.

housing destabilized the housing market. As Harlem deteriorated, Columbia expanded into the cheap land.<sup>39</sup>

In 1959 when the gym was proposed, neither students nor community organizers opposed it. The school had almost no athletic facilities, save for a run-down basketball court, and alumni were eager to create an environment more conducive to competitive Ivy League sports. The only opposition came from neighbors who resisted the idea of a private building on public land, but in the first years of planning, there was little controversy.

A proposed separate door for the community sparked the outrage. In the eyes of the architects of the gym, the “back door” was merely a topographical convenience. It wasn’t that black people had a separate door from white people; it was that the community, of which most happened to be black, had a separate door from the students, most of who happened to be white. The community, in addition to the black students, did not see it this way. Much rage in response to the gym stemmed from the fact that the gym was being built on public land, yet the public would have limited access. Some black students, including Karla Spurlock, BC ’72, said in later interviews that they felt that it was their responsibility to use their Ivy League education to push back against the encroachment on the community’s property.<sup>40</sup> Black Columbia and Barnard students were in a unique position as a minority within a community that had a different racial composition from its surroundings.

Tension had been brewing on campus all year by April 1968. The final turning point—the point at which something had to change—came with the assassination of Martin Luther King in Memphis on April 4, 1968. Riots overtook much of the nation. Although Martin Luther King

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<sup>39</sup> Stefan Bradley, *Harlem vs. Columbia University* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 29.

<sup>40</sup> Karla Spurlock, interview by Michelle Patrick, 2011, Class of 1971 Oral History Collection, Barnard College Archives.

had fallen out of favor with many white politicians and Democratic constituents, he was still the face of the Civil Rights movement to marginalized black citizens across America. Damages caused by the rioting in D.C. cost \$27 million. New York avoided riots in part due to the mayor going to Harlem and apologizing in person to members of the community, but the sense of disappointment and alienation remained.<sup>41</sup>

Feeling more alienated than ever from the nation and from their university, the SAS published in the *Spectator* an op ed on April 10, demanding modifications to Columbia's policies in order for Columbia to combat American racism. These demands were (1) a committee to review the Columbia College social science curriculum to make it more meaningful, (2) a Columbia course in African-American history, (3) the addition of black faculty, (4) the addition of black administrators, and (5) an end to harassment of black students by security guards. The op-ed reiterated that these demands had been expressed before, but that "the University has paid lip service to some of these demands while offering excuses for not dealing with others."<sup>42</sup> There is no evidence to support that the university had previously addressed any of these demands, as they continued to be raised in the years following 1968.

SAS was not alone in accusing the university of racism after King's assassination. At the university's service for King, forty SDS students walked out after Mark Rudd, president of SDS, walked to the podium and said, "the University administration is committed to a policy of racism. We feel that Dr. Truman and President Kirk are committing a moral outrage against Dr. King's memory." The walkout was unpopular among Columbia students, many of whom found it

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<sup>41</sup> Dana Lanier Schaffer, "The 1968 Washington Riots in History and Memory," *Washington History* 15, no. 2 (2003): 4-33; Clay Risen, "The Night New York Avoided a Riot," *The Morning News*, January 16, 2009, <http://www.themorningnews.org/article/the-night-new-york-avoided-a-riot>.

<sup>42</sup> Student's Afro-American Society, "Insincerity and Ineffectiveness," *Columbia Daily Spectator* (New York, NY) April 10, 1968.

offensive and “outrageous.”<sup>43</sup> The assassination precipitated SDS’s suddenly increased interest in civil rights.

SAS’s cared only about civil rights, and SDS, though concerned with civil rights, found fault in university involvement in political affairs outside of race. These tensions led to the split between black students and white students when the groups eventually converged on Hamilton Hall to protest university policies.

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<sup>43</sup> Michael Stern, “Walkout Disrupts Memorial to King,” *Columbia Daily Spectator* (New York, NY) April 10, 1968.

## Chapter 2: Racial Divides at the Protests, April 23, 1967

Social movements of the 1960s saw strong central leadership with concrete demands. With the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, Betty Friedan became the face behind second-wave feminism, which strove to build a world in which women could have fulfilling work lives in addition to home lives. The antiwar movement saw many of its leaders on college campuses like Berkeley, Kent State, and Brown University. They demanded an end to military action in Vietnam. Tom Hayden was a household name among these protesters. Most notably, the Civil Rights Movement, led by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and a small flock of others, including Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, and A. Phillip Randolph, saw legislation pushed forward to end separate but equal, the Voter Rights Act, and the Civil Rights Act.

If organization characterized social movements of the 1960s, disorganization characterized the protests movements at Columbia during the same time. SAS and SDS did not have the same demands, nor did they envision the week ahead of them. By all accounts, the events of the week of April 22, 1968, were entirely unplanned. The year was drawing to a close, and though it had been a politically turbulent one, there was no expectation that this turbulence would eventually result in the arrests of 700 students. The largest headline in the *Spectator* the morning of April 23 was "City Council and CORE Plan Rally to Protest New Gym," next to a smaller article about the College's plans to offer a new course in Black history, the first of its kind.<sup>44</sup> The headline in the *New York Times* the same day was "High Court Backs a Lewd-Book Ban Limit to Young."<sup>45</sup> A boring day in a tempestuous year.

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<sup>44</sup> "City Council and CORE Plan Rally to Protest New Gym," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, (New York, NY), April 23, 1968.

<sup>45</sup> "High Court Backs a Lewd-Book Ban Limit to Young," *New York Times*, (New York, NY), April 23, 1968.

The day before, an advertisement appeared in the *Spectator*: “SDS: Let’s-Get-Our-Stuff-Together General Assembly.”<sup>46</sup> On the agenda appeared “Anti-IDA campaign. Repression at Columbia: The IDA Six. The Chapel Hoo-Hah. Columbia’s racism—the gym, University expansion, etc.” “Hoo-hah” and “etc”—those words embodied the disorganized, do-as-we-please credo of SDS, and the next morning, when 500 students descended on the Sun Dial, a central location on Columbia’s campus, nobody batted an eye.<sup>47</sup> Protests had been happening all year and the pattern had been the same every time. The students protested, some other student counter-protested, the administration threatened consequences. Rinse and repeat. Although many students at Columbia would have liked to categorize themselves as radicals, they were in many respects rebels without a cause, only capable of rabble-rousing.

SDS also lacked the savvy to reach a wide audience. Engrossed in their own rhetoric, they often failed to win over other students who wondered what on earth they were talking about. One student remembered, “Immersed in a theoretical discourse influenced by the émigré philosopher Herbert Marcuse, they often seemed condescending when speaking to a large audience.”<sup>48</sup> Mark Rudd and the rest of the SDS elite were often seen as naïve, pampered liberals, and they did little to transcend this reputation. As for SAS, they maintained a very minor campus presence and there was often complaining among themselves declaring that black students did not respond to important political happenings.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Columbia Spectator* (New York, NY), April 22, 1968.

<sup>47</sup> David Bird, “300 Columbia Students Set Up Barricade” *New York Times*, (New York, NY) April 24, 1968.

<sup>48</sup> Mark Naison, *White Boy: A Memoir* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 69.

<sup>49</sup> J.L. Alvorn, *Up Against the Ivy Wall: a History of the Columbia crisis* (New York: Scribner, 1968), 38.

And so, on the day of the protests, faculty and administration walked right past the students into their offices without registering what was happening.<sup>50</sup> Protests had become a part of everyday life at this point. On October 16, 1967, students protested the war.<sup>51</sup> On December 20, 1967, students protested Soviet Jews' plight.<sup>52</sup> On March 21, Harlem locals protested the gym.<sup>53</sup> None of the aforementioned protests were in any way notable, which is precisely the point. It was happening all the time. For this particular protest, the students planned to march into Low Library and present to President Kirk a list of demands. These demands had previously been published in Rudd's open "Letter to Uncle Grayson." The demands were an end to construction of the gym, an end to Columbia's involvement in the IDA, and no punishment for the six leaders of SDS who had protested in Low Library the week before.<sup>54</sup>

The protest turned out to be different from other protests that year. Members from both SDS and SAS—in other words, both black and white students—were present. It is unclear how the students came together to protest, but as both of them had taken the gym as an issue they cared about, somehow they rallied around the cause. Some witnesses to the protest noted a somewhat angry, unruly element to the crowd, although just as many describe the scene as being similar to every other protest. In his memoir *White Boy*, Mark Naison, a white student, describes Mark Rudd, then the president of SDS, shedding the formerly cerebral rhetoric of SDS in favor

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<sup>50</sup> Lionel Trilling, interviewed by Chet diMauro, 1968, Columbia Crisis of 1968 Project, Columbia University Archives.

<sup>51</sup> "'Resistance' to Hold Protest Tomorrow," *Columbia Spectator*, (New York, NY) October 10, 1967.

<sup>52</sup> "March Will Protest Soviet Jews' Plight," *Columbia Spectator*, (New York, NY) December 20, 1967.

<sup>53</sup> "150 Stage Torchlight Gym Protest," *Columbia Spectator*, (New York, NY) March 21, 1968.

<sup>54</sup> Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 441.



of a more provocative, aggressive style.<sup>55</sup> Cicero Wilson, leader of SAS, made a speech criticizing the university's policies, but then lambasted the white students for their complicity in this, which alienated him from the otherwise sympathetic white students.<sup>56</sup> Everyone was asserting their dominance, while simultaneously deciding whom they wanted on their side and what aspects of the protests were most important to them. Was it important for Wilson to pander to white students? These decisions were being made on the spot.

The administration was expecting the students to descend on Low Library, as the students had publicized the intentions to do so. Most administrative offices were in Low Library, including President Kirk's. The administration planned to hand the leaders of SDS a letter from the Vice President saying that Low would not be the appropriate place for them to meet, but that he would be happy to meet elsewhere on campus to discuss their grievances.<sup>57</sup> They handed the letter to the students, unsure of who was the leader. Although Mark Rudd took a leadership role early on, in general, the leadership of SDS seemed to be whoever was talking the loudest at any given moment.<sup>58</sup> Many students agreed to meet with the administration, but many did not. They continued toward Low.

Popular memory holds that SDS led the protest, even though SAS played an equal role. Perhaps it is because there were fewer SAS students participating and SDSers were more vocal about the protests in the years following the protests. There are far more interviews with white students than with black students. This could be in part because there were more white students

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<sup>55</sup> Mark Naison, *White Boy: A Memoir* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 89.

<sup>56</sup> Mark Rudd, *Underground* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 58.

<sup>57</sup> Henry Coleman, interviewed by John A. Roberts, 1968, Columbia Crisis of 1968 Project, Columbia University Archives.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

than black students, but the limitations of the study of this topic lie in the lack of primary sources from members of SAS and other non-affiliated black students.

Finding the main entrance to Low Library closed, and the side blocked by about fifteen security guards, someone yelled “To the gym site!” and the crowd retreated to the construction site of the gym at 113<sup>th</sup> and Morningside Drive.<sup>59</sup> There, the police arrested one white student, Fred Wilson, CC '69, in an apparent scuffle after the students tore down the chain links barricading the construction site. The students returned to campus.

What happened next is a matter of some debate.<sup>60</sup> According to a *New York Times* article from a few days later, Rudd, the SDS leader, stood up and shouted, “We’re going to have to take a hostage and make them let go of IDA [the Institute of Defense Analysis, the weapons manufacturing institute Columbia was involved with] and let go of the gym.” Other accounts have him dithering on what to do. Rudd himself wrote in his memoir that he was dejected at this point and felt that the day had been a failure.<sup>61</sup> Upon convening at the Sun Dial, Wilson, the leader of SAS, and Rudd took the podium and directed the crowd to Hamilton Hall, a building in the south side of campus. Rudd later stated that when he said to take a hostage, he meant taking a building hostage.<sup>62</sup> Within a few minutes, three to four hundred students had filtered into the main alcove of Hamilton, a seven-floor, relatively small academic building that housed mainly classrooms, in addition to the office of the Dean, Henry Coleman. For a while, the students milled about, unsure of what to do. Some SDS and SAS leaders delivered speeches and aired grievances with the university expansion, gym, and participation in the war. They did not agree

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<sup>59</sup> Mark Rudd, *Underground* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 60.

<sup>60</sup> David Bird, “300 Columbia Students Set Up Barricade” *New York Times*, (New York, NY) April 24, 1968.

<sup>61</sup> Mark Rudd, *Underground* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 61.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

on what exactly they hoped to accomplish by occupying Hamilton, but they did know that their presence gave them leverage over the university in a way they had not had before.

Meanwhile, Coleman went to his office as usual, determined not to dignify what he saw as a wild carnival by caving to their demands. It was his choice to enter the building, and he did not see any reason to be fearful, as many students were coming and going in Hamilton to class, which was not cancelled in spite of the protests. Eventually, however, when Coleman tried to exit the building, students told him that he was their hostage. Coleman and two other staff members barricaded themselves in the office and waited, communicating with staff in Low via telephone. He recalled later hearing that there might be guns in Hamilton, and feeling scared.<sup>63</sup> The students did not free him until 3:30 pm on April 24.

The divisions between SDS and SAS, which had until this point been contained, began to fester. Some SAS students wanted to mimic the Howard University building occupation a month earlier, in which their branch of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee had barricaded an administrative building until the university caved to their demands. Howard students had denied access of the building to faculty and students. White Columbia students, however, wanted to keep communication open between the occupied building and the rest of campus. They also wanted to stay until Columbia agreed to sever its ties with the CIA, but many black students felt they would be sitting in Hamilton for years if that was their demand.<sup>64</sup> Black students may have felt a sense of despair and rage about communicating with the university, since their attempts at this before had been met with derision and dismissal. Additionally, SDS's leadership style,

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<sup>63</sup> Henry Coleman, interviewed by John A. Roberts, 1968, Columbia Crisis of 1968 Project, Columbia University Archives.

<sup>64</sup> Karla Spurlock, interview by Michelle Patrick, 2011, Class of 1971 Oral History Collection, Barnard College Archives.

which they called “hyper-democracy,” entailed everyone having a say, and SAS thought this to be undisciplined and disorganized.<sup>65</sup>

The second point of contention was the atmosphere of the protest. Some white students seemed to treat the event as a bacchanal, bringing candy and balloons, posting pictures of Chairman Mao, Malcolm X, and even Lenin.<sup>66</sup> Michelle Patrick, BC '72 and a black student, described a sense of responsibility to uphold the race. “When you walk down the street, when you’re in a classroom, when you’re in a public accommodation, you represent the race. You speak the King’s English, you dress properly, you use proper table manners,” she said later. There was a fear among the black students that should Hamilton Hall be destroyed in the takeover, the media would portray them as rioters. They did not want to give anyone an excuse to write them off as uncivil, undisciplined, or unintelligent, and they felt the white students were providing this excuse.

The third problem was the rumored presence of armed black activists from Harlem approaching Hamilton. Violence was on everyone’s minds. Following the assassination of King, riots had erupted across the country. Students had also heard that SNCC planned to converge on Hamilton in revenge for the killing of a black student in Tuskegee, Alabama a few weeks earlier.<sup>67</sup> In fact, many black residents of Harlem and beyond, including Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, did converge on the building, although the fears of violence turned out to be unfounded. Interestingly, although both white and black students occupied the building, in some

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<sup>65</sup> Mark Rudd, *Underground* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 66.

<sup>66</sup> Michelle Patrick, interview by Bob Solomon, 2011, Class of 1971 Oral History Collection, Barnard College Archives.

<sup>67</sup> Mark Naison, *White Boy: A Memoir* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 91.

later descriptions of events, only the black participants would be called “militants.” The white participants were referred to as “protesters.”<sup>68</sup>

By 2 a.m., three hundred students had occupied Hamilton for 16 hours. The divisions were by then palpable. From 2 am until 5 am, SDS and SAS leaders held separate meetings. SDS intended to go back to SAS with a compromise—that they would keep the administrative offices, including Coleman’s, barricaded, but they would let faculty and students enter and exit freely. When they met with SAS, Wilson, the chapter president, informed them that the white students were no longer welcome in Hamilton, and it would be better if they took their own building.<sup>69</sup> At that point the black students felt it was impossible to let the white students stay because it would have “diluted the effectiveness of the protest.”<sup>70</sup> Not all black students supported the separation. Some felt that it moved against the integrationist values of the 1960s. Largely, though, black students felt it was the right choice.

The black students got to work making Hamilton habitable. They found a shower in the basement of Hamilton Hall. They created a schedule.<sup>71</sup> Their efforts did not go unnoticed. Coleman would later say that the black students took excellent care of the building, and one architecture student noted that Coleman felt sympathy for the black students because they appeared so much more disciplined.<sup>72</sup> Every day until the bust, a week later, they held press conferences outside Hamilton. They spent most of their days cleaning and sitting in meetings. It

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<sup>68</sup> J.L. Alvorn, *Up Against the Ivy Wall: a History of the Columbia crisis* (New York: Scribner, 1968), 38.

<sup>69</sup> Mark Rudd, *Underground* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 69.

<sup>70</sup> Stefan Bradley, “‘Gym Crow Must Go!’ Black Student Activism at Columbia University, 1967-1968,” *The Journal of African American History* 88, no. 2 (2003): 163-181, accessed April 1, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3559064>

<sup>71</sup> Michelle Patrick, interview by Bob Solomon, 2011, Class of 1971 Oral History Collection, Barnard College Archives.

<sup>72</sup> Richard Rosencranz, *Across the Barricade* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1971), 3.

came as a shock to the students, therefore, when the *New York Times* printed photos of destroyed buildings, wastebaskets that had been urinated in, desks and chairs damaged, windows smashed.<sup>73</sup> They had put enormous effort into maintaining the building.

The morning of April 24<sup>th</sup>, when the black students expelled them from Hamilton Hall, the 200 white students who had occupied Hamilton initially went to Low Library, and without much difficulty, they broke into the presidential suite on the second floor. This occupation of President Kirk's office would surely result in their arrest, they thought, but nobody came to get them. For a couple hours, they debated whether to barricade Kirk's office, or to go provide support in front of Hamilton to protect black students from arrest. Rumors of the police interrupted the meeting and sent dozens of students, who were apparently more afraid of police than they claimed to be, climbing out the windows to avoid arrest. Only twenty-five remained in Low.<sup>74</sup>

By the time the SDS-ers outside of Low convened in the student center to discuss their next move later that day, the situation was out of their control. It was bigger than SDS or SAS. Students not affiliated with either group had joined the occupation in Low. Then, the architecture graduate students refused to leave Avery Library in a show of support for the undergraduates, a victory for the protesters. Students spilled into Fayerweather Hall. Meanwhile in Hamilton, civil rights groups and community groups had mobilized to bring food and supplies to the students. Demonstrations of students and community formed on Amsterdam Avenue, next to Hamilton Hall, and the occupation found its way onto all major news outlets.

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<sup>73</sup> Karla Spurlock, interview by Michelle Patrick, 2011, Class of 1971 Oral History Collection, Barnard College Archives.

<sup>74</sup> J.L. Alvorn, *Up Against the Ivy Wall: a History of the Columbia crisis* (New York: Scribner, 1968), 29.

On Wednesday the 24<sup>th</sup>, a campus group called the “Majority Coalition” amassed 2,000 signatures to a petition condemning the “tasteless, inconsiderate, and illegal” protests. There were almost twice as many signatures as there were people occupying the building. Thus, the purported liberal spirit of Columbia was not as pervasive as many would have it.<sup>75</sup>

By Friday, 4 days after the protest began, the administration, fearing violence, closed the university, hoping to reach a compromise with protesters. White students occupied another building, Mathematics, because Low was filled to capacity.<sup>76</sup> The students were more invigorated than ever, but aware that the situation could not be permanent, and that one of two things would happen. Either the police would come, or Columbia would submit to the demands.

On April 30, a week after the protests began, about a thousand police came to “liberate” the buildings from the 1,200 students who were camped out inside.<sup>77</sup> Violence broke out at the buildings that held white students. 87 students were treated at St. Luke’s, and there were several reports of police brutality.<sup>78</sup> Students accused the police of beating, kicking, and hurting them. However, the only serious injury was to a police officer, who was paralyzed after a student jumped on him.<sup>79</sup> The *Times* reported that 720 protesters were arraigned. Thirty-five additional students were treated for injuries at a temporary infirmary set up at Knickerbocker Hall.<sup>80</sup> Black students were escorted out of Hamilton by as many black policemen as the NYPD could find,

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<sup>75</sup> Cox Commission, *Crisis at Columbia: Report of the Fact-Finding Commission Appointed to Investigate the Disturbances at Columbia University in April and May 1968*, 1968, 119.

<sup>76</sup> Mark Rudd, *Underground* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 76.

<sup>77</sup> Sylvan Fox, “Police Act to Oust Students From Five Buildings at Columbia” *New York Times* (New York, NY) April 30, 1968.

<sup>78</sup> “University Calls in 1,000 Police to End Demonstration As Nearly 700 Are Arrested and 100 Injured,” *Columbia Spectator*, April 30, 1968.

<sup>79</sup> Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 458.

<sup>80</sup> Sylvan Fox, “Police Act to Oust Students From Five Buildings at Columbia” *New York Times* (New York, NY) April 30, 1968.

and went without a fight, much to everyone's relief. Students recalled black policemen crying as they escorted them out.<sup>81</sup> The police and administration were terrified that if any violence broke out in Hamilton, there would be rioting in Harlem, since there was already so much racial tension as a result of King's death. Thus, the treatment of the black students was careful and highly planned, though more out of fear and less out of sensitivity.

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<sup>81</sup> Michelle Patrick, interview by Bob Solomon, 2011, Class of 1971 Oral History Collection, Barnard College Archives.



### Chapter 3: After the Protests

Black and white protesters found themselves in close quarters once again following the bust and their arrests. 711 people were arrested, almost all of them students, the rest from the community.<sup>82</sup> The police drove them to seven jails around the city to await arraignment. While they waited, eating salami sandwiches and drinking weak tea, tensions flared. For many of the white students, being arrested was a badge of honor, more about their personal experiences than the change they sought.<sup>83</sup> The arrest was a celebratory extension of the occupation they had just completed, tangible proof that they were participating in activities that stood for the liberal spirit of the times. For the past several years in the South and on campuses throughout the country, civil disobedience and subsequent arrest had become the norm in the resistance movement against segregation. White Columbia students felt they were joining in. Linda Leclair, a well-known figure on campus for the fight she had had with the administration over whether she could live off campus with her boyfriend, sang “We Shall Not Be Moved.”<sup>84</sup> Black students found this flippant. “I wanted to strangle her,” recalled Michelle Patrick, BC ’72, a black freshman. The associations of liberalism and successful activism existed within the black community, but there was more of a sense of urgency, that they had been arrested, yes, but they still had a long battle ahead of them. Their actions would directly impact their quality of life for reasons other than a romanticized activist lifestyle.

The police eventually funneled the students to 100 Centre Street for arraignment. Some students were charged with resisting arrest, including those who went limp so as not to make the

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<sup>82</sup> Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 457-458.

<sup>83</sup> Janet Price, interviewed by Elyse Pitock.

<sup>84</sup> Michelle Patrick, interview by Bob Solomon, 2011, Class of 1971 Oral History Collection, Barnard College Archives.

police officers' jobs any easier. Most students were charged with criminal trespassing, although some were charged with malicious mischief.<sup>85</sup> Mark Rudd, who was not arrested in the first bust, would later be charged with riot, inciting a riot, criminal trespass, and criminal solicitation.<sup>86</sup> The sheer number of arrested students may have made it difficult for the police and law enforcement to come down hard on those arrested. There were not enough hours, nor enough lawyers, to hand out heavy charges to all seven hundred students.

Some students who hadn't been arrested agreed to go on a strike against the university. A similar thing had happened at Berkeley in 1964, when 10,000 students refused to go to class in response to university actions against political protesters. 900 of 1200 teaching assistants refused to cross picket lines, and the *New York Times* deemed the strike 75% effective.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, such actions, while dramatic, were not unprecedented. Students on the Strike Coordinating Committee, the haphazard group formed by SDS students to try coordinate actions in various occupied buildings, urged non-occupying students to boycott until the university met the demands of the protesters. Alan Westin, leader of the Ad Hoc Faculty Group, that was trying to manage negotiations between the administration and the striking students, urged faculty to respect the students' strike, saying, "In response to last night's events, we believe we are fully within our professional responsibilities in urging our colleagues to respect this strike."<sup>88</sup>

In popular memory, the protests and the associated liberal spirit have been seen as overtaking everyone, but a large contingency of students and faculty did not agree with the

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<sup>85</sup> Jeffrey Abraham, "Arrested Students Arraigned; Trials Set for Early June," *Columbia Spectator*, (New York, NY) May 1, 1968.

<sup>86</sup> J.L. Alvorn, *Up Against the Ivy Wall: a History of the Columbia crisis* (New York: Scribner, 1968), 267

<sup>87</sup> Stephen Cole, "Reviewed Work: the Spiral of Conflict; Berkeley, 1964," *Social Forces* 50, no. 4 (1972): 548-549, accessed March 21, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2576819>

<sup>88</sup> J.L. Alvorn, *Up Against the Ivy Wall: a History of the Columbia crisis* (New York: Scribner, 1968), 297

strike. Letters to the editor of the *Spectator* in the days after the strike widely condemned the actions of SDS. "As everyone of his now 3% majority clapped, [Rudd] said that no one is to be spanked except Illegal Authority, the ogre of Low. And the people bowed and prayed, and the five ring circus played on and on," wrote a student from the class of 1969. Another letter said, "I condemn the Students for a Democratic Society who first promise a scientific approach for dealing with men, with 'social justice,' and who then initiate brute force and mob rule. The 'liberals' abandoned reason for force." The chaos in the wake of the protest bothered many, including those who may have been sympathetic beforehand.<sup>89</sup>

Class was officially cancelled for a week after the strike, but most classes stopped meeting for the rest of the year even when class was technically in session. Barnard cancelled classes for two days, and the student body later released a statement saying, "While we encourage girls to support Columbia strike by continuing to boycott Columbia classes, we feel that classes at Barnard should resume after the temporary suspension." The Barnard administration issued a statement condemning the Columbia administration's "sluggishness" in addressing the protests, which "fostered extremist actions, the forcible seizure of the buildings, the use of unwarranted police force."<sup>90</sup> Barnard was in a difficult position as an affiliate of Columbia. Over a hundred Barnard students were arrested in the bust, and students were undeniably a part of the university community. Black Barnard students from the class of 1971 felt similar isolation from the student body that black Columbia students felt. Barnard, however, was seen as somehow less complicit with the perceived sins of the university because it was a separate entity, thus allowing them to issue a statement condemning the Columbia

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<sup>89</sup> *Columbia Spectator* (New York, NY) May 2, 2015.

<sup>90</sup> "Barnard Votes to Suspend Classes for Two Days" *Columbia Spectator* (New York, NY) May 1, 2015.

administration. This allowed them to maintain their mythology of liberalism, even though Barnard had been complicit in much of the institutional racism that plagued Columbia in its treatment of students.

The division between white and black students flared again, with the white students primarily concerned with broad political change and shutting down the institution, and the black students primarily concerned with entry to and inclusion in said institution. There was still no word from the administration as to the status of the gym. Separate from the issue of the gym, SAS demanded “greater control over admissions of blacks, including a separate admissions committee on which black students would constitute a majority; control over the interim committee charged with creating a Black Studies Institute at Columbia; more financial aid for black students; a black lounge in the dormitory space previously occupied by the NROTC; more black faculty.” The protest escalated their demands and aims.<sup>91</sup> The white students also decided that one of their new demands was amnesty from the university regarding their insurrection. This demand was not met with sympathy from the public, as people felt that students, right or wrong, should have to answer for their often-illegal actions. An SAS spokesman did say that if any black students were suspended, all 350 black students at Columbia would boycott the university, but it was not their primary concern.<sup>92</sup>

President Kirk and the trustees appointed a fact-finding commission, the Cox Commission, in the summer of 1968, to analyze what had happened and why it had happened that way. The commission compiled thousands of pages of testimony from students, administration, faculty, and residents of Morningside Heights. It took only two months to collect,

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<sup>91</sup> Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 471.

<sup>92</sup> Murray Schumach, “8 More Suspended in Columbia Move” *New York Times*, (New York, NY) May 25, 1968.

analyze, and publish the information. Missing from the material was testimony from any SDS or SAS leadership, who refused to participate in the interviews. SAS had the Strike Coordinating Committee read a statement to the committee that SAS would not be participating in interviews. The actions of the students in Hamilton continued to be shrouded in mystery. The commission also sought non-leader members of the group, but was largely unsuccessful in getting testimony from any black students. Thus, the report, *Crisis at Columbia: Report of the Fact-Finding Commission Appointed to Investigate the Disturbances at Columbia University in April and May 1968*, had more speculations than facts as to the nature of the feelings and actions of the students in Hamilton Hall.<sup>93</sup>

The Harvard *Crimson*, in its review of the 222-page volume, compared the Cox Report to the Kerner Report, Lyndon B. Johnson's investigation into the causes of the 1967 Detroit race riots. It criticized the Cox Report because, unlike the Kerner Report, it did not offer any solutions or recommendations about how to help the black members of the community, unearthing the continued illiberalism of the community. The Cox Report harshly judged the faculty, trustees, administration, chaplains, and students.<sup>94</sup>

Public opinion also condemned almost every faction. In a letter to the editor at the New York Times, Robert S. Smith, a third-year law student at Columbia, wrote, "I think that those demonstrations have produced in the law faculty a mood of denunciation and fear—directed, apparently, at everyone under thirty."<sup>95</sup> Some people thought that the university had handled the situation poorly, but that if they didn't punish the students the trustees and administration were

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<sup>93</sup> Cox Commission, *Crisis at Columbia: Report of the Fact-Finding Commission Appointed to Investigate the Disturbances at Columbia University in April and May 1968*, 1968.

<sup>94</sup> Andrew Jamison, "The Cox Report," *Harvard Crimson*, (Boston, MA), October 9, 1968.

<sup>95</sup> Robert Smith, "Law Faculty's Declaration," *New York Times*, (New York, NY) May 24, 1968.

effectively declaring themselves useless. Others thought that to punish the students would be unforgivable. Zellig Harris wrote in a letter to the editor to the *Times*, “No faculty should take refuge in the fact that the crisis happened to occur at Columbia rather than on its own campus.”<sup>96</sup>

Columbia was humiliated by its fall from grace. It had been an esteemed Ivy League university, the alma mater of Alexander Hamilton, Rogers and Hammerstein, and Dr. William Halsted, and now it was the university whose students had mutinied against it. It saw in the next few years the departures of President Kirk (who had resigned by the fall term of 1968) in addition to many of Columbia’s most renowned faculty, including Daniel Bell, famed intellectual.<sup>97</sup> Even the most liberal faculty were alarmed by how quickly Columbia had dissolved into chaos, and with Columbia finding no sympathy from the political right or left, many no longer wanted to be associated with the university.

As for the protesters, the white and black students again diverged in their methods. White students saw a split between SDS and the Strike Coordinating Committee, the latter of which wanted to focus on the university. SDS, meanwhile, wanted to take the protests to the streets. On May 17, at least 82 Barnard, Columbia, and Teachers College students were arrested in and around a Columbia-owned apartment building on 114<sup>th</sup> Street in protest of the university. On May 21, 115 students and an additional fifty members of the community were arrested in Hamilton Hall, in an attempt to protest disciplinary actions against SDS leaders. This time, the protests were not of a biracial nature, and the protesters were only white. SAS did not participate in this protest because amnesty was not a priority for them. Popular opinion was not on the side

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<sup>96</sup> Zellig Harris, “Against Penalizing Students,” *New York Times*, (New York, NY) May 24, 1968.

<sup>97</sup> Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 464.

of these white protesters, because it was not about civil rights and more about protecting individual members of SDS.<sup>98</sup>

As for Mark Rudd, he became a leader of the radical Weatherman faction, a group that claimed authority on “what is to be done” regarding the American revolution they called for. Their primary rallying call was that “The main struggle going on in the world today is between U.S. imperialism and the national liberation struggles against it.”<sup>99</sup> Their views extended beyond opinions on American imperialism; the Weather organization also believed that monogamy reinforced female subjugations. Famously, three members of the organization died when the bomb they were constructing exploded in their Greenwich Village town house.

The black students, though they had different goals, did not become complacent. Students blockaded a building on April 14, 1969 because their request for separate admissions was denied. They would be quick to dispose of their tepid alliance with SDS if it meant achieving their goals, and when they realized that to work within the university’s structure would benefit them more, that was what they did.<sup>100</sup> Most notably, the trustees disbanded the Morningside Park gym in March 1969. Two months later, they ended any involvement in the IDA. With regards to amnesty for protesters, SDS did not receive any formal pardon. Punishment for the arrested students was as loose as a warning letter, and, at worst, a semester-long suspension. Mark Rudd would describe the administration as “vindictive” with regards to punishment, but almost everyone else agreed that the protesters, particularly SDS, deserved some sort of admonition. Later, Rudd would say that the focus on amnesty distracted from the more important goals,

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<sup>98</sup> Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 473.

<sup>99</sup> Mark Rudd, *Underground* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 147

<sup>100</sup> Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 487.

“educating and mobilizing people around the war and racism.”<sup>101</sup> Some of the black students’ demands were met as well. The freshman class in 1968 had had 145 Asian, black, and Hispanic accepted students. In 1969 the number had risen to 260.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Mark Rudd, *Underground* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 104.

<sup>102</sup> Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 472.



## Conclusion

Currents of unrest sweeping the country—among them opposition to the Vietnam War, an increasingly militant civil rights movement, and the ongoing decline of America's inner cities—converged with particular force at Columbia, casting the Morningside campus into the national spotlight...[The resultant] events led directly to the cancellation of a proposed gym in Morningside Park, the cessation of certain classified research projects on campus, the retirement of President Grayson Kirk, and a downturn in the University's finances and morale. They also led to the creation of the University Senate, in which faculty, students, and alumni acquired a larger voice in University affairs.

-From Columbia University's "About" page on its official website

Almost 50 years after the influential and formative protests that shook Columbia University to its core, unseating the administration and interfering with the short- and long-term functioning of the university, Columbia, still with a reputation for social innovation and liberalism, has promoted a version of events that is not entirely accurate. On its "About" page, which gives a brief history of the school, it vaguely refers to a "proposed gym," and the "larger voice" university affiliates acquired in the following years. Students today associate the protests with pride in the university and the student body, a place and people who have been on the right side of history.

That the university would even mention, let alone paint in a positive light, the protests is surprising, considering how badly these protests went for everyone involved. What the information on Columbia's website fails to mention is the history of deep-seeded racism that was a catalyst for these protests, the university's role in the construction of the gym, and the way it resisted change before and after the protests. This was not a triumphant moment for Columbia; it was a battle waged by students against Columbia, and vice versa, a total breakdown in functioning and communication. Columbia celebrates its history of activism, and there have been multiple other protests over the years, including a protest of the planned expansion into

Manhattanville, but none of them shook the school—or New York, or academia in general—to its core the way the 1968 protests did.

The 1968 protests were characterized by discord between all parties: the administration and the students, the faculty and the administration, the faculty and the students, the conservative students and the protesting students, and, most importantly, the white protesting students and the black protesting students. Existing research on the topic focuses primarily on the discord between the administration and the protesters. There has also been conversation about the role of the faculty in diffusing tensions between the students and administration. All academic works mention the split between SDS and SAS, but I analyze the differences between the two groups and their innate and hidden conflict. I track the differences in their philosophies, methods, and treatment at the hands of others.

This false dichotomy of students versus administrators—or liberals versus conservatives, or the older generation versus the younger generation—creates a vision of a world where one side was right and one side was wrong. The truth, as I present it in this paper, is more complicated than that. In investigating the discrepancies between SAS and SDS in a more nuanced way, the historian can ascertain the difficulties of liberal activism in general.

My primary sources include oral histories, some of which were conducted immediately after the protests, and some of which were conducted years later. Each set gave different insight into the events. The oral histories from immediately after the protests included more details and comprehensive descriptions of what had happened. In the oral histories from later, including some that I conducted myself, the subjects of the interviews had had years to reflect on what went wrong, what went right, and how the protests changed them and the political and racial landscape of academia. Other primary sources included newspapers, particularly the New York

*Times* and the *Columbia Spectator*, both of which covered the protests in great detail and published countless op-eds and letters to the editor from participants and observers. Additionally, the *Spectator* published some advertisements by student groups that were helpful in analyzing how the groups mobilized. While gatherings and meetings today are promoted via social media—never would a group advertise their intentions in a newspaper, and especially not in print—in 1968, this was the most effective way to reach an audience larger than the immediate members of SDS and SAS.

I found evidence to support my thesis that the expectations and experience of the black protesters and white protesters was different, even if a scarcity of sources made this difficult. Many of the secondary sources cited one another in an endless game of academic hot-potato, and as previously described, SAS had an informal code of silence and its members have not spoken publicly about what went on inside Hamilton Hall. Still, I was able to find oral histories with a handful of black students, all women, and the observations of SDS members who worked with SAS for the first sixteen hours of the protest, faculty who tried to work with them, SAS's op-eds in the *Spectator*, and other observers' contributions were all helpful in constructing a narrative of the fundamental ways in which SAS was different from SDS.

Showing the chronology of racial tensions at Columbia assists in a greater understanding of why the events during and after the bust happened the way they did. That a black fraternity was not allowed on campus prior to 1968, that SAS championed cafeteria workers' rights, that SDS focused on Vietnam War activism—all these things show the misalliance of what students had and what they wanted. Largely, black students stood to gain more personally from the protests, because their place on campus was already precarious.

The most important part of understanding Columbia in 1968 better would be obtaining more information from the black students who were involved—and, as crucially, uninvolved—in the protests. This gap creates a problem in trying to have an equal understanding of Hamilton Hall and the other occupied buildings. Those doing research on the topic in the future may want to focus their efforts on this gap in the existing knowledge.

The significance of my research extends beyond understanding the environment of Columbia in 1968. It is an examination of the discord that arises when different groups rally around the same cause, be they different genders, classes, or races. There was something within the mainstream ruling class that bothered many liberals in the 1960s. Liberals disagreed with the actions of Johnson and their government, and they also disagreed with the actions of longstanding administrations of the institutions they attended. That having been said, they disagreed with different elements of the administration. White students at Columbia saw conservatism and greed everywhere they looked, while the black students wanted equality on a day-to-day basis.

On November 24, 2015, a grand jury in Ferguson, Missouri, acquitted Darren Wilson, a police officer, in the shooting of an unarmed 18-year-old black man named Michael Brown. Although witness accounts as to what happened varied somewhat dramatically, with some recounting Brown reaching for Wilson's gun and some recounting Brown running away with his hands in the air, much of the public agreed that the killing had a racial element. Would an unarmed white man have been shot in the back multiple times? And further, would a grand jury have acquitted the offending police officer? Public outrage stemmed from the fact that there was ample evidence to support Wilson going to trial, if not being convicting, and the incident sparked

minor rioting, vigils, the slogan and hashtag “Black Lives Matter,” and renewed national conversation about race in America.

When the news of the acquittal broke at Columbia University, about two hundred students gathered around the Sundial for a vigil. Students polled immediately after estimated that the crowd was 60% black, at a school with 10% black students. A couple of weeks later, students held a “die-in” at a popular university holiday event, lying on the ground to block pedestrians from walking down college walk—the same area where the protests were held decades earlier. A Facebook message circulated:

SHUT IT DOWN. [BUT KEEP THIS HUSH UNTIL WE DO]  
 Action on CU campus in response to the recent non indictment of the Pigs who killed Mike Brown...and the continued police murder of Black bodies.  
 DIE-IN TOMORROW (12/4) during Tree Lighting Ceremony. Lay down on College Walk btwn the Sundial & 116th @ 6:40pm. Wear Black....  
 White Allies: Because your bodies are not targeted by the system in the ways that Blk&Brown bodies are, we ask u to please help us pass out fliers at this time instead of participate in die-in.<sup>103</sup>

The statement echoed the discord of the spring of 1968. White liberals and black liberals hoped for the same things, but black liberals did not feel they would be able to work in conjunction with white students to achieve it.

Columbia’s legacy as a progressive institution is a fallacy. As many students opposed the protest as participated in it, and the university, at the end of the day, tried to vanquish the rebellion. Additionally, many of the same problems continue to plague the school. As Columbia prepares to expand its property north into Manhattanville, many Harlem residents are preparing to be displaced. Columbia has historically been a conservative institution, with some liberal faculty and students.

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<sup>103</sup> Taken from the Facebook account of Bella Pori, November 2014.

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