

Student protests essay



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Although student protests can be traced back to the 1920s the turbulent clashes between students and police that characterize the student protests of the 1960s and 1970s serve as a defining era for the history of student civil disobedience. Officials from the University of Bridgeport, Connecticut in 1990 said that while student protests have grown less violent since the 1960s they are "less passionate." Three years later author Seymour Lipset claims that campus mood had turned calm when compared to the earlier years of student uprisings as students became less interested in social change and politics and more focused on grades. Typically the American mood as a whole has dictated the course students will take and will generally dictate the degree of passion and civil disobedience.

There is little doubt about the power of student activism in the United States and police intervention only serve to further the respective causes of each movement throughout history. The discussion that follows documents the various students' causes that culminated in student protests and law enforcement's response to them in the 1960s and 1970s. Student Protests and Clashes with Police in the 1960s It is not surprising that campus protests of the 1960s and early 1970s were more pronounced than any other time in US history. The 1960's itself was a time of social change and resistance throughout the country had college students joining in to further the cause, often aligning themselves with one activist group or another. Describing the early 1960s, author Robert Rhoads writes that those years: "Stimulated a growing interest in human rights, and within the ivy walls of American colleges and universities the democratic pulse beat with a passion and verve never before witnessed."

” Author Kenneth Heineman maintains that coming into the 1960s student protests had been previously characterized by rejections of both the Vietnamese War and parental authority. The formation of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) began to take on an iconic role as the US lost control of the Vietnamese War and “ civil unrest” in America in general. Starting out with just a handful of student members at the onset of the 1960s, by the end of that decade SDS had a membership of approximately 100, 000. By the end of the 1960s SDS had established itself as a group wholly “ committed ...to violent confrontation with...officials.

Heineman cites startling statistics from the 1960s. He maintains that out of two thousand US college and university campuses over three hundred of those campuses conducted “ sit-ins, building takeovers, riots, and strikes. ” According to Heineman: “...between January 1969 and April 1970 – young radicals bombed five thousand police stations, corporate offices, military facilities, and campus buildings...” Moreover, out of a campus population of ten million students some twenty-six thousand were arrested, thousands sustained injuries all while conducting protests. Meanwhile “ America’s cities became combat zones”.

Some politicians were blaming this civil unrest on “ lawless blacks and students. ” The Free Speech Movement of the University of California, Berkeley campus is often credited with setting the tone for much of the turbulent student protests of the 1960s. Having spent the summer of 1964 in the South with the Freedom Riders and assisting the group with registering African American voters student activists returned to Berkeley soliciting donations and support for a civil rights’ agenda. They did this by setting up

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tables at the campus. Campus officials announced that the school ban on such activities would be rigorously enforced. A former student Jack Weinberg was sitting at one of the tables on October 1, 1964 when campus police asked him to show some identification.

When Weinberg refused he was arrested. Almost immediately students converged upon the police car surrounding it while Weinberg remained inside with the result that the car remained immobile for some 32 hours. Modest estimates claim that at least 3,000 students had surrounded the police car. During the 32 hour period students used the police car as a speech venue and negotiated the withdrawal of charges against Weinberg. The students nevertheless continued their protest against the university's rules against political solicitation on campus by organizing a massive sit-in at Sproul Hall.

On December 3, 1964 the sit-in ended after police were called in by campus officials with the result that 800 students were arrested. One month later the campus officials moved to prosecute the organizers of the sit-in which only sparked a much larger protest. The protest ended in January 1965 when campus officials partially gave in to student demands and designated the steps at Sproul Hall the venue for political activities at designated hours. Another serious movement took place at the Columbia University campus in New York in 1968. This protest happened at a time when America was facing its most serious challenges of the 1960s. The Vietnamese war was raising serious concerns in America with the Tet offensive in Vietcong and North Vietnam.

Moreover President Johnson announced that he would not be seeking a second term. Civil Rights Activist Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated with the result that a series of riots broke out across the nation. A number of violent conflicts between the Democratic National Convention held in Chicago and law enforcement also dominated the news.

Robert Kennedy was assassinated. The revolution at Columbia University would also make its mark as one of the most violent demonstrations in response to the challenges in the US at the time. The Columbia University protests began in 1967 and culminated in a mass stand-off in 1968. The protests were masterminded by the SDS Columbia University branch in coordination with other Student interests groups. In March of 1967 SDS activist Bob Feldman uncovered information filed in the International Law Library that revealed a link between the University and the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) which is a weapons' research program for the US Department of Defense. The uncovering of this information set off an anti-war campaign by the SDS at Columbia University commencing in April 1967 and finally coming to a head in April the following year.

Tensions were also escalating over the University's plans to build a segregated gymnasium. In March 1968 the SDS and its affiliates conducted what was in hindsight a relatively peaceful demonstration which insisted that Columbia University end its association with the IDA. The demonstration involved the quiet occupation of the Low Library. In response to the demonstration 6 students were placed on probation for contravention of the University's stand against indoor sit-ins.

The student activists primarily composed of the SDS and the Columbia University's Student Afro Society (SAS) staged a second protest the following month in response to the probation scheme against the IDA demonstration. The attempt to occupy the Low Library was circumvented by Columbia University's security personnel and the students took the protest to the Morningside Park site for the planned gymnasium. In an attempt to truncate construction of the gymnasium students clashed with the New York City Police who were at the site for security reasons. At the site one protester was arrested and the SDS returned to the University campus and occupied Hamilton Hall.

At Hamilton Hall there was some disagreement as to who should remain at the Hall and it was finally agreed that the SAS activists would remain and the SDS would move on. The SDS then moved in on the Low Library and other key campus buildings. The entire occupation had a common goal, it was a call for Columbia University to withdraw from the IDA and to discontinue its plan to construct the segregated gymnasium. On the morning of April 30, 1968 New York police officers converged upon Columbia University and took two vastly different approaches to ending the demonstration. The demonstration at Hamilton Hall was disbanded peacefully primarily because African American attorneys were already at the scene negotiating with New York police and as a result the students cleared the Hall without incident.

However, the other occupied buildings were another matter entirely as 150 students sustained various injuries and approximately 700 more were taken into police custody. In an article published in *The Nation*, Marvin Harris documents the violent confrontation between police and the Columbia

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University activists. According to Harris approximately 1, 000 police officers converged upon the campus on April 30, 1968 at about 2: 30 in the morning and: “ attacked an approximately equal number of students barricaded inside five Columbia University buildings. ” The ensuing confrontation endured for at least three hours and Harris described the manner in which police treated the students as follows: “ Many students were thrown or dragged down stairways. Girls were pulled out by the hair; their arms were twisted; they were punched in the face.

Faculty members were kicked in the groin, tossed through hedges, punched in the eye. Noses and cheekbones were broken. A diabetic student fell into a coma...Many students bled profusely from head wounds opened by handcuffs wielded as weapons...” Harris’ description continues along similar lines. He describes students splayed out in the grass moaning in pain and left to suffer. At another stage during the confrontation some 2, 000 students who were merely onlookers were “ set upon by the police and pinned against the gates. ” In the final analysis the student protest was beaten into submission by police intervention, others were taken into custody.

In response to the blatant police brutality displayed at Columbia University, Vice President David Truman said when asked by the press about the advice he would give to college officials facing similar incidents of unrest replied, “ Don’t wait. Call in the police. ” It is therefore hardly surprising that one month later when activist students at Columbia staged yet another protest that in addition to 170 arrests: “ ...an even more vicious and uncontrolled display of police brutality was unleashed across the campus. ” In 1967 students at the University of Wisconsin under the auspices of the SDS took a strong stand

against Dow Chemical Co. , a corporate entity that manufactured and sold Napalm to the US Department of Defense for use in the Vietnamese War. In 1967 students were already engaging in anti-Dow protests across the US on various college campuses.

In February when Dow sent recruiters to the University of Wisconsin students gathered around the campus building housing the recruitment interviews. Three students were arrested without incident although the charges were subsequently dropped. Dow visited the University of Wisconsin yet again on October 18th, 1967 and this visit did not end as peacefully as the previous one. In a tumultuous standoff with police students lined the building in which the Dow recruitment interviews were to be conducted. Orders by police to leave were ignored by the hundreds of students lining the campus building and police responded violently by clubbing students indiscriminately as they forced their way into the building.

While 41 police officers and 47 students sustained injuries another 71 students were arrested. Author David Maraniss obtained several eye witness accounts from reporters, faculty members, students, police officers and bystanders. There was one common theme. The force used by the police at the Dow protests on October 18th, 1967 was excessive. The police moved wildly through the throng of students swinging at them with their clubs. Sgt. Kenneth Buss was cited as having said that the protesting students: " laid on the floor, kicked at you, spat at you, cursed you - but it wasn't the violent type where we met the swinging fists and trying to choke you. " Capt. George Schiro also saw officers using their batons but thought it was

necessary for self-defense. Two other witnesses described the sounds coming from the protest and standoff with police as “ eerie.

” In addition to hearing the sounds of screaming protesters these witnesses described hearing: “ the sound of people having their heads hit. It was like a basketball bouncing on the floor. Or hitting a watermelon with a baseball bat. ” If anything good came out of the bloodshed and turbulent confrontations it was that the students ultimately accomplished their respective goals . The univeristy after suspending many students did in fact scrap its plans for the segregated gymnasium and cut all ties with the IDA. The standoff between police and students at Columbia University was another truning point in American history.

It marked one of those revolutionary episodes that altered the course of America in pursuit of truth and justice and the long and painful road to that end. Student Protests and Clashes with Police in the 1970s As the 1970’s approached there was a growing discontent among the American involvement with the Vietnamese war. Demonstrations were staged all over the United States calling for American withdrawal from the war. By 1968, Richard Nixon was elected President and promised to end the war in Vietnam although the war would continue for a few more years. But on April 30 Nixon announced a US inviasion of Cambodia.

It is therefore no surprise that civil unrest in response to this mood erupted in US college campuses. Two protests at the onset of the 1970 s deserve special mention they are the Kent State and Jackson State protests. Philip Semas recalls the horror at Kent State University in Ohio in his artilcle

published in The Chronicle of Higher Learning on May, 11 1970. According to Semas account, on May 1st just one day after Nixon announced his plan to send troops to Cambodia students at Kent State already upset about other issues staged a demonstration which commenced with a mass rally on Friday, May 1st under the auspices of black student groups and anti-war groups. On that night a number of students converged upon downtown Kent and smashed out windows. At that stage, Kent Mayor Leroy Satrom asked for assistance from the National Guard who delayed their response by 24 hours.

By that time the students were conducting another mass rally with the result that the university's ROTC was destroyed by fire. The following Monday another student rally was held but the National Guardsmen intervened using tear gas to end the rally. Some witnesses report that a number of students threw " tear gas canisters and rocks at the police. The guardsmen responded by chasing students and some were trapped by demonstrators. Witnessed described the following: "...guardsmen turned, knelt, and fired as it following an order. The guardsmen fired into the crowd, not above it.

" Four students were killed as result of the shooting and three others were critically wounded. Meanwhile, according to Semas other student demonstrations were taking place across the nation on at least 200 other campuses in response to the American invasion of Cambodia. These demonstrations involved fires, " occupied buildings" and students fighting with police and throwing rocks and bottles at them. These deaths only led to more wide spread student strikes and confrontations with police with the result that at least 450 college campuses closed temporarily with Kent State remaining closed the longest for six weeks. Jackson State College in

Mississippi was experiencing civil unrest and tensions were already heightened by the Kent State shootings.

Making matters worse students responding to a rumor that Fayette Mayor who was the brother of a murdered civil rights leader and his wife had been murdered started a violent protest that was characterized by riots and fires. These activities began around 9 p. m. on the 14th May, 1970. Firemen responding to the fires were disrupted by the fray and called for police assistance. About 75 police officers armed with various weapons responded to the call which was enough to keep the student masses at bay and the firemen were able to contain the blazes.

After the firemen left the scene the police proceeded to the Alexander Center a female dorm at Jackson State to break up a crowd of about 100 students that had gathered there. The police were approximately 100 feet away from the gathering opened fire on the students killing two and injuring 12. The reason for the attack is in dispute. Police claim that they saw a sniper on the roof, and students claim that the police fired on them for no reason. FBI reports indicate that the police unleashed just under 500 rounds of ammunition and Alexander Hall sustained over 160 bullet holes.

There were several incidents of campus protests in the early 1970's primarily in response to the Nixon position on Vietnam and Cambodia. President Nixon responded by appointing a commission to investigate and report on the recurring incidents of violence and unrest generally on US college campuses. The report which was published in September 1970 commented in part that: " The crisis on American campuses has no parallel in the history

of the nation. This crisis has roots in divisions of American society as deep as any since the Civil War.

The divisions are reflected in violent acts and harsh rhetoric, and in the enmity of those Americans who see themselves as occupying opposing camps. Campus unrest reflects and increases a more profound crisis in the nation as a whole ... If this trend continues, if this crisis of understanding endures, the very survival of the nation will be threatened.

” Although the impact of the violent protests across US college campuses would eventually lead to the end of the war, violent confrontations between police and students would continue although to a lesser degree. An article appearing in Business Week, May 16th, `970 expressed the view that the student protests and the ensuing protests with police “ should have convinced the US that the student protest movements” were matters “ to be taken seriously. ” Be that as it may, change did not occur overnight and campus unrest continued. Although anti-war campaigns and civil rights protest would be the catalysts for most stand-offs other interest groups would join in for various other reasons. For instance groups advocating gay rights or women’s rights would often use the anti-war forum to register their particular grievances against the establishment. Tensions escalated again in 1972 following Nixon’s announcement to mine the harbors of North Vietnam.

One noted demonstration took place at the University of Florida at Gainesville. Police intervention once again was excessive and unnecessary. In this protest in May of 1972 students staged a sit in on the Gainesville campus and when asked to move refused to do so. Campus police were

alerted as well as the local police from Gainesville who together employed a number of violent measures to force the students to disperse. In the first instance they opened water cannons on the students and when that failed to produce satisfactory results police fired tear gas into the crowd. In the years that followed the incidents of police and student confrontations are becoming fewer and fewer and to date none has reached the level of violence experienced across US campuses during the 1960s and early 1970s.

James Fendrich, Professor of Sociology said that the cumulative impact of the students' anti-war movement did result in congress cutting back on the defense budget. Fendrich goes on to state that Congress did in fact pass a War Powers Resolution Act that restricted the power of the president to go to war without approval of congress. All of those things are attributed in part to the tens of millions of people that were involved in many different instances of protest during the late 1960s and early 1970s. " Current Nature of Police and Student Confrontations The level of violence and tumult that characterized much of the police and student confrontation in the face of student protests and demonstrations during the 1960s and the early 1970 appear to be a thing of the past.

This ebb in culture however is attributable not only to current police practices and student moods but also to social tempers. As noted previously, society's response to social, political and economic matters greatly impact upon students' response to the same issues. As for the police, in the years following the turbulent 60s and 70s the police have become more accountable, and in a culture where homeland security trumps civil liberties in an age of terrorism police have been focused less on civil disobedience and

more on crime and terrorism. While law enforcement's priorities change to reflect the national security concerns, student's activism reflect the changes in society.

Students' approach to activism has taken a vastly different turn since the 60s and 70s. They have become peaceful and much smaller in group participation. For instance, one protest in 1990 staged by a group of students from a New Haven college involved an overnight sit at a New Haven train depot and attracted only 90 students. The protest was in response to a shortage of shelters available for the homeless. In an article in the St. Petersburg Times, the current climate between police and students during student protest is reflective of how the times have changed the approach both sides take in times of unrest.

In this Article published on April 2, 2003 staff writer Anita Kumar describes a student protest by University of Florida students against the war in Iraq. The following excerpt is taken from her article: " They gathered near Gainesville's Liberty Tree, holding white candles and listening to speakers rail against the war. A local singer performed John Lennon's Imagine. A police helicopter circled overhead. " The group was primarily comprised of faculty members and locals with only a few students attended the vigil. Tom Auxter, a professor at the university claims that many of today's students represent a " generational change.

" Law professor Joe Little thinks that students have simply " become more conservative. " Yet another professor calls it " a culture of narcissism".

Conclusion One important observation stands out. The United States today is

more sharply divided on political issues than it was in the 1960s and 1970s. Back then the nation was more strongly united against the war and the inequities in society. Today the nation is strongly united in its desire for national safety and protection against future terrorist attacks.

In this mutual concern for safety and security it is no surprise that students are not conducting turbulent protests and inviting police intervention. Moreover, the sharp divide on political issues makes it even more difficult to mobilise interest groups in the same manner as they were able to come together in the 60s and 70s. There is no longer a common goal in America, moreover goals and priorities shift rapidly.