

Columbia: The Night of Infamy

On April 29, 1968, in the dead of a night that will live in infamy in the annals of education in this country, Columbia University President Grayson Kirk and Vice President David Truman ordered onto the campus 1,000 cops, who proceeded to club, pummel, and drag into paddy wagons 720 students and faculty, as well as to brutalize thousands of innocent onlookers. The students had occupied and sat-in at several buildings at Columbia for a week, an act of non-violent disobedience to dramatize their demands for Columbia to end its connection with the Vietnam War through the governmental Institute of Defense Analysis, to stop construction on a gymnasium in a public park against the protests of the local community, and to institute more power by students and faculty in the decisions of the university which is, after all, an academic community of teachers and students. The faculty members were lined up in front of the struck buildings to protect the students from any intrusion of police violence, so they were clubbed by the police to get to the demonstrators. Despite the frenzied brutality of the police, the demonstrators never actively resisted arrest; they were simply not very cooperative in the arresting process.

Whether one favors or opposes the sit-in tactics of the demonstrators, there is no excuse, no justification whatsoever, for the Columbia administration to call in a thousand cops to use violence against un-armed students. It is the height of irony that, shortly before their monstrous

deed, Kirk and Truman, at a press conference, sharply criticized the striking students for “resorting to force”; in contrast, Kirk and Truman called upon the ancient academic verities of reason, peace, and the free search for truth. Then, boom! came the *polizei*, ordered in by those same men, who seemed to see no inconsistency with their previous pronouncements.

The student and faculty body at Columbia, and indeed elsewhere, learned many hard-won lessons that night. They learned that underneath the high-flown sentiments about reason and free inquiry in the academic community there lies the mailed fist. They learned that these same high-flown academic leaders refuse to negotiate one iota when a supposedly crucial “principle” (not giving amnesty to transgressors) is in danger. And so, while less eminent but far more sensible universities like Boston University and Long Island University quickly granted complete amnesty to *their* sit-in students the previous week, and had the whole episode under control and forgotten inside of twenty-four hours, the rulers of mighty Columbia refused to do the same and called out their police-hooligans instead. The students and the faculty learned that an institution that is happy to cooperate in research for napalming innocent peasants is hardly going to stop short at clubbing a thousand or so students.

This learning process will cost Columbia very dear. The martyred demonstrators, emerging bloody but unbowed from the buildings under police charge, held up the V-for-victory signal. For they knew that by losing this engagement they had won the war; throughout the campus, the majority of students and many of the faculty, previously apathetic or opposed to the strike, are now so deeply angered at the police (most of them learned about “police brutality” for the first time) and at the administration, that they’re determined to throw the administration out and to strike until their demand is met. This is the way revolutions proceed: A small but determined group embarks on a dramatic deed to publicize its demands; they are met with brute violence by the power structure; this brings the rest of the subject population over to the revolutionary side. At Columbia, the revolution has begun.