

Spring 1968 and Columbia

This unpublished letter, responding to the Columbia College Today article on Spring 1968, and some of the letters that followed (CCT, Letters, July-August and September-October 2008), is not quite as well-composed as I would have liked, but I have other things to do, and at least it sets out a few thoughts and impressions. While writing it I tried to stick close to the strike itself, but went off on many a tangent. This is an indication of the fact that, although the strike became in some ways magnified out of all proportion, the issues *were* much bigger than the strike itself. I have relegated the less central (but still relevant) excursions to a series of footnotes. Links to everything are after the footnotes.

To the Editors:

I read with great interest the issue highlighting the 1968 events and the letters in the following issues. Doubtlessly CCT has had an outpouring of responses to this anniversary issue, far more than you could ever print; clearly many of us still feel very strongly about the whole business of 1968, even after 40 years. Central to the strike were the urgent issues of the whole epoch, and our interest itself testifies to the earnest engagement in the life of our time which is supposed to be one of the things we learn from the Columbia experience. I entered Columbia in Fall 1969, more than a year after the strike, but I followed the events at the slight remove of suburban Long Island, and not least because I hoped to attend Columbia.

All sides in the matter behaved rather badly in certain respects. The strikers made the University into the enemy, the Establishment, and conflated legitimate grievances about defense-related research and the gym with the war and racism, and were motivated also by a whole complex of cultural rebellion. The war research I found quite objectionable, even indecent, on the part of the University. About the gym I don't have much perspective – the University, always a major player in N.Y.C. real estate (as the song “Who Owns New York” testifies), may have been dealing with the matter with some arrogance with respect to the Harlem community; I can't judge this. (The fact of having entrances on both east and west sides seems to me a matter of convenience, and not necessarily objectionable in itself, as long as the facilities were shared.)

But a university is an enormous and complex entity and one shouldn't expect to be happy with every policy. I thought these issues could have been addressed without resort to shutting down the school. It seems that the strike quickly became radicalized, that is, dominated by the more extreme tendencies among the strikers, and the University, not amused by the takeover of buildings, soon responded in kind. The way the police were used (and the way many behaved) left a lot to be desired, to say the least. Perhaps there were opportunities to defuse the situation that the University did not take, but that was surely problematic given the polarization of the opposing sides, with the cooler heads not usually making the decisions. The rebels, unlike more mature or less ideological activists, were not able to limit the scope of the strike to the issues immediately at hand, and bound them together inseparably and non-negotiably with their context of the evils of war, capitalism, and racism. My overall impression is that the magnitude of the strike was far out of proportion to the issues at stake, significant as they were, and that there were great distortions of the way the role of the University was seen.

Though disturbed at age 16 or so by certain aspects of the strike, I chose Columbia in part because it seemed to promise a degree of engagement with the issues of the day which attracted me – for me the reputation of the University was not in the least ruined by the events of Spring 1968. (It was something like the School of Athens, but more up-to-date.) The strike reinforced the idea I had of Columbia of a place where people were involved, serious, and intelligent. Considering all that was happening at the time, choosing a sleepy little school was out of the question. I remember attending, in 1969 and the few years following (which included, in Springs 1970 and 1972, a couple of smaller, apparently biennial, anti-war-and-racism strikes),

numerous meetings at which the urgent issues of the day were discussed heatedly. I found much of it confusing and extreme, and I heard much with which I disagreed, but found it a useful and formative experience, a sort of crucible of ideas and arguments in search of an imperative. ¹

A simple issue I would like to raise is with the contribution from from Captain Richard B. Curtis, USN (Ret). While I can agree with some of his comments, one or two others illustrate just how far mentalities about 1968 – and thus perceptions – can still diverge.

It is quite unfair to characterize antiwar demonstrators, comparing them to those who participated in or supported the war effort, as “those who chose the less risky option of being an antiwar demonstrator or a draft dodger and then faded away.” It would seem Captain Curtis has never heard even the basics of why there was such vociferous and passionate opposition to the war. He did his duty as he saw it, and probably could not have avoided it except by resigning from the service, but seems unable to imagine why many others saw his sense of duty as a terrible complacency, a failure to recognize that our nation was engaged in a perverse and ill-considered war, following a foreign policy inconsistent with humane and democratic ideals.

Those of us who demonstrated against the war did so out of what we felt to be a moral and ethical imperative, out of a conviction that it was terribly wrong. It was never an “option”, any more than any true and serious calling is an option – to be an artist, a scientist, pastor, or even soldier (as I can well imagine, since at fourteen or so I dreamed of West Point and a military career – yes, now it can be told). None of us wanted to get killed, naturally, but this was far from our only or even primary motivation in opposing the war. Those who avoided conscription by leaving the U.S., too, were motivated far more by horror and revulsion at the idea of taking part in such a war than by cowardice, and suffered greatly for their choice of conscience. ²

It is also quite a stretch to say that “the warriors put themselves at risk to preserve the demonstrators’ First Amendment Rights”. Captain Curtis would probably argue that the U.S. was preventing the spread of communism, but not convincingly. After all, we lost in Vietnam, but how many dominoes fell? But one can hardly compare the threat presented by communists in Southeast Asia with that of, say the Third Reich or Imperial Japan. Never mind that it might be a strategic as well as a profound moral error that, in the presumed effort to protect our liberties, the U.S. has not hesitated to support the worst and most corrupt local tyrannies, objecting only to the communist ones, or to those with which we no longer see eye-to-eye. (Was it necessary, for one example, to support Saddam Hussein just to oppose Iran? I think another set of policies should have been in order.) Where our First Amendment rights are concerned, I think that in my lifetime they have been threatened as much from within – e.g., the G.W. Bush administration – as by the Soviet Union.)

I regret that members of the military were subjected to hostility by some within the antiwar movement. (Let’s not forget, however, that nonconformist types were also subjected to plenty of harassment from the more uncivilized elements of conventional society.) On either side there is little excuse for incivility; some people didn’t know any better. We who opposed the war disliked the whole idea of the military, at least as we saw it in use in 1968. But most of us were able to make the distinction between those personnel who earnestly supported the war, whom we naturally saw as adversaries (not because of their uniforms, but because of their attitudes), and those who were merely swept up by events and served their country for better or for worse, those many hundreds of thousands who, even as survivors, were themselves victims of a senseless war.

Although Captain Curtis understands poorly the motivations of the strikers, at least he

has the good sense to acknowledge the the horrors of war. Retired USAF Colonel Stanley G. Maratos seems rather more closeminded about all that, and sees events in Vietnam and events stateside strictly through the lens of the soldier, with that military mentality that is long on duty and efficiency but short on vision and imagination. Although some of the strikers did indeed behave as hooligans, it is absurd for him to call them Columbia's Vietcong. If the VC had only been occupying a few buildings and throwing a few bricks, we wouldn't be talking about this now, 40 years later. In the midst of his reminiscences of the war, when he mentioned the 16-inch guns of the *New Jersey* pounding the hills around Tuy Hoa, I was tempted to add parenthetically "that well-known counterinsurgency weapon".

As I perused the comments about 1968 and the letters that followed, I was pleased to notice that several veterans of the strike remained politically committed and were able to carve out for themselves careers in which they could make a difference. Their convictions moderated by maturity, they still hold to their core principles: the instincts for justice that motivated them in 1968 to protest, in a way however flawed, a gym and the University's participation in war-related research. Such principles and instincts should not seem foreign in the United States of America. (They did not all just "fade away" as Captain Curtis puts it.)

What one hears again and again from the members of the '68 generation are the stories of the radicalization they underwent as a result of their disillusionment with what they'd grown up to love and believe in – our ideals of liberty and justice. All over the world we could see our country behaving far too often in ways inimical to our democratic values. At the threshold of adulthood we were discovering that the history we were taught while growing up was in many ways a whitewash – our economic and political manipulations of other countries and our military adventurism had been obscured to favor a nationalistic narrative that emphasized the struggle against world Communism. We felt deceived. How could we enjoy our freedom and prosperity with a clean conscience while knowing that elsewhere in the world people were wretched, and that to some degree we are responsible? Or that in the U.S. a whole race has been subject to a systematic discrimination? ³

Vietnam was a perfect example of everything that is wrong with U.S. policy when guided by the military-industrial behemoth, nationalist concerns, sphere-of-influence politics, a cynical *Realpolitik* (inherited straight from Metternich; pragmatic, but short-sighted and unconcerned about the facts of life as experienced by ordinary people everywhere), provincial notions of foreign cultures, and (recently) neoconservative ideology, and rather than by a philosophy of humanism and internationalism. In order to resist the spread of Communism (or Islamic fundamentalism), we ally ourselves with local strongmen, and are surprised to learn these subject peoples sympathize with the enemy. When will we learn? ⁴

Footnotes

¹ The Crucible:

Although I am an artist and don't follow politics very closely, they are still a minor obsession of mine, and from time to time over the years I've been moved to consider and reconsider my feelings about politics and the ethics of war and armed struggle. Sometimes this has happened because of talks with friends (often with more radical views than I have), or because I'd seen a film or read material, like that in Columbia College Today, that dealt with the subject. On the whole my opinions haven't changed very much from when I was in college, but they certainly have deepened, and they are almost always in a state of flux. Though it is partly the discomfort of my confusion, when forced to confront my beliefs, that drives me to reconsider them, this very ambivalence has at least kept me in what I see as a healthy state of disequilibrium. (And although I think I would have felt about the same even if I hadn't attended Columbia, this habit of incessant questioning seems definitive of the Columbia education.)

While for years I had a basically intolerant attitude towards communism (and therefore

Marxism), I read a few things that broadened my perspective (notably Edmund Wilson's *To the Finland Station*, and Murray Kempton's *Part of Our Time: Some Ruins and Monuments of the Thirties*). For example, although I still find terrorist violence loathsome, to be reminded of the situation of the poor and the working class in the 1800's made me see certain acts of revolutionary or anarchist violence in their historical contexts, and see the genesis of the habit of ruthlessness, the axiom that you have to play hardball if you want to play at all, on the part of the revolutionaries of the 20th century. Though I generally deplore extremism, I have to give credit where due.

(Although terrible and inexcusable conditions still exist in many parts of the world, including the prosperous first world, the material condition of the poor and of the working class in the west today can not be compared with that of 150 years ago. Thus in the west today I find revolutionary violence much less excusable, in degree, at least on grounds of economic injustice. Where there is the possibility of representation, of political change by nonviolent means, insurrection has no place, and would-be revolutionaries should think of the long term and work towards their goals through electoral politics and propaganda like all the other parties. In the developing world it's often another story, and we don't lack for examples of insoluble despotism and corruption. In those cases revolutionaries may be ill-prepared to govern should they win, and may be subject to all the weaknesses that flesh is heir to, but at least they rise up in arms when there is really no other way. As it goes, "When in the course of human events...")

If I had to sum up my feelings about revolutions I'd say that most of them have and have had a great legitimacy, it's just that the results are often disappointing. The ends do not justify the means, but a certain amount of violence is sometimes either necessary or inevitable, and the only thing that can redeem that blood is good government. It was a good thing to get rid of Louis XVI, Tsar Nicholas, Chiang Kai-shek, and Batista, but terrible in many respects the consequences. In the U.S., things worked out far better in most respects, but there are still the shameful records of slavery, war against the indigeneous people, and the exploitation of the people of the hemisphere and beyond, to say nothing of an unchecked economic development that has become the lifestyle model for the rest of the world and which threatens the quality of life on the planet.

2 The Draft:

I myself had begun to fill out the required forms to apply for C.O. status, but realized I could not honestly claim to object categorically to participation in war under any circumstances, and could not satisfy the legal requirements. After all, an American who believes earnestly in the values according to which we fought for independence can hardly be categorically opposed to violence. Such a person may be antiwar, but must make an exception at least for revolutions against tyranny. Nor did I think that, should the U.S. again face an enemy like the ones it faced in 1941, I could in good conscience refuse to participate. But the war in Vietnam was no such thing – we were not fighting for liberty and democracy, we were defending a puppet military regime in a proxy war. If we were really interested in justice in our sphere of influence, there would have been much less support for the Communists and perhaps no Viet Minh.

By sheer luck, my twin brother and I came up with a 326 in the birthday draft lottery in the summer of 1970, the year we turned nineteen. If it had been a 50 I don't know what we would have done.

3 Radicalization, and Moderatization:

At the time I would have described my convictions as left-liberal or radical, with sympathies for socialism, but decidedly non-Marxist and anti-communist. (I thought it must be possible to achieve a highly-regulated capitalism.) During my first semester in the new world of college in the city in that heady time, green as I was, I went to two big demonstrations. The first was at Fort Dix in New Jersey in October 1969, where many busloads of demonstrators went and did their best to put the military uptight; we considered it a fairly good day that the soldiers had refrained from shooting us and only CS-gassed us. (*Don't forget Kent State and Tienanmen Square and all the rest. And don't consider it a big favor when they don't happen to start shooting for no reason.*) The second was the Moratorium demonstration in Washington, D.C., of which my experience was largely the exhilaration of a cold, sunny day on the Mall, in the midst of some half a million people demonstrating peacefully against the war, but

later that night also the disagreeable adrenaline rush of observing with a few friends, from a block or two away, some heavier action between the police and some hard-core radicals who thought it politically meaningful to throw cobblestones at the police and satisfying to get tear-gassed in return.

On campus I went to a few small meetings of a couple of the splinter groups that had formed from the dissolution of SDS, and fell in with the Labor Committee, a small group of easygoing guys, basically pragmatic radicals who didn't have fire in their eyes, who were mainly trying to radicalize the Transit Workers' Union. I wrote a page or two of historical propaganda for them. But I lost interest by the end of my first year, the strike of Spring 1970 and the other activities having perhaps satisfied my appetite for politics. I became more skeptical about the potential for political action, changed my intended major from Political Science-Urban Studies to Art History, and decided to pursue a career in art. I didn't believe any more that I could save the world, but I felt that I could possibly redeem something through art. I let my subscription to *The Militant* lapse, and kept my ACLU membership.

For all the defects of the American way of life and the sins of the government in foreign and domestic policy, I never saw any reason to embrace an ideology in many ways antithetical to our democratic and humanitarian values. Even allowing for the tendencies of the young toward extreme views, I was surprised in those days how many campus radicals were enamored of Mao and Ho and Castro (not so many of Brezhnev). After all, I reasoned, one scarcely needs Marx to be see the socioeconomic situation of African-Americans a century after emancipation as a national disgrace, or to disapprove of U.S. conduct in an affair like the war in Vietnam. You don't need to be an iron Bolshevik to loath the domination of society by a military-industrial complex and powerful economic interests, or to be disgusted by the assassination of a democratically-elected president such as Allende. I had thought, long before 1989, that the tyrannical tendencies of these communist governments (for all they may have accomplished for good in areas such as education and literacy, industrialization, land reform, health care, and the status of women) and their economic failures were all too evident to allow an intelligent person to seriously consider the possibilities of Marxism without enormous skepticism. I have always been as unfaithful to any political creed as to any religious one, but some of my best and most intelligent friends have more faith and still have something to say for Marx, notwithstanding everything.

In the last few years I've seen one or two recent documentary films on the radicals of the era – in particular, S.D.S. and the Weather Underground. Interviewed more than 30 years later, the participants express various regrets about some things that happened and certain things they did, some of them very serious matters, and most of them acknowledge the considerable element of madness in what they got into doing. But all still reaffirm the sense of social justice that motivated them in the first place. None have repented in the sense of saying that they were mistaken about their grievances; none have become neo-conservatives.

4 Foreign Policy:

Apropos of the dominoes we used to hear so much about, look at what happened in that part of the world. We finally threw in the towel and got out. What was left of the ARVN and the government of South Vietnam fell apart. Vietnam was united under Hanoi's communist rule. Cambodia was overrun by the Khmer Rouge but their time is thankfully over, partly thanks to intervention by Vietnam. (Some blame the bloody rampage of the Khmer Rouge directly on U.S. withdrawal, but I fail to see how the U.S. would have had anything to gain by continuing its engagement in Vietnam under the circumstances.)

Burma, now Myanmar, is ruled by a fanatical cult. The other countries have not fallen to the Communist juggernaut, and are doing rather well economically, along with Vietnam. China indeed has influence in Southeast Asia, but no more than its economic affairs would lead us to expect. China has not retaken Taiwan, and communists do not rule in the Phillippines or Indonesia, nor do they threaten California. China by now is scarcely a communist society, even if the Communist Party runs things. 1989 or no, globalization has set most of the world on the path of development. I dont think that things in Southeast Asia would have been very different, geopolitically speaking, if the Soviet bloc had not repudiated communism and dissolved.

It would be a mistake to describe the US involvement in Vietnam as a function of “containment” of the communist threat to US interests. When George F. Kennan elaborated his notion of the strategy of containment, I don’t think he had in mind that, to hinder the spread of communism and to support long-range US interests, we should support unequivocally the governments of those front-line states no matter how oppressive. I think he may have taken for granted that an intelligent, well-balanced policy gives great attention to the promotion, whenever possible, of democratic institutions, political and civil liberties, and social and economic prosperity in the countries in which we have influence, and not just to those with whom it is convenient to form alliances. This is obviously a better way to ensure the sincere loyalty of those countries – the peoples and the governments – to the US. This is the lesson that was overlooked in South Vietnam, in Batista’s Cuba, and in the Iran of the Shah, and in many other countries.

Allen Schill
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Links:

Columbia College Today article on Spring 1968 (May-June 2008):

http://www.college.columbia.edu/cct/may_jun08

Letters, Columbia College Today, July-August 2008:

http://www.college.columbia.edu/cct/jul_aug08/letters_to_the_editor

Letters, Columbia College Today, September-October 2008:

http://www.college.columbia.edu/cct/sep_oct08/letters_to_the_editor

Anyone who wants to see the *original* Columbia College Today article on the 1968 strike, it’s here as a PDF:

http://www.college.columbia.edu/cct/sites/cct/files/cct_spring_1968.pdf

The lists of contributors and letter-writers below is simply Google bait – since it’s much too late to send this to CCT (which oddly does not have any blogs or bulletin boards for ongoing discussion of issues that come up in the magazine), and I am only citing one or two of the participants, I thought I might get a few bites just by listing the names. (That is, obviously, if you happen to Google yourself – or someone else does – my little screed might come up.) If you wrote once, maybe you’ll still be interested. I hope nobody minds.

Contributors to the original article of May-June 2008:

Alex Sachare ’71 (Columbia College Today Editor)

Josh Rubenstein ’71, Somerville, Mass. – **Nothing radicalizes like ...**

Michael Jacoby Brown ’69, Arlington, Mass. – **Legitimate violence**

Michael Stern ’70, Palo Alto, Calif. – **Trying to find order and meaning**

Dr. Philip T. Valente ’71, ’77 P&S, San Antonio, Texas – **Would never be the same**

Dan Feldman ’70, Port Washington, N.Y. – **For once, I experienced certainty**

Rev. Douglas W. Smith ’68, Pomona, Calif. – **“We have to know when ...”**

David A.H. Rapaport ’69, Scarsdale, N.Y. – **My most vivid memory**

Dr. Peter G. Joseph ’70, Castro Valley, Calif. – **My notion of authority changed**

Ret. USAF Col. Stanley G. Maratos ’53, ’60 Bus. Staten Island, N.Y. – **Columbia had its Vietcong**

James J. Periconi ’70, Peekskill, N.Y. – **I became radicalized**

Retired USN Capt. Richard B. Curtis ’62, Fairfax, Va. – **Its violence was unnecessary**

Arthur L. Thomas ’50, Greenwich, Conn. – **It affected everyone, everywhere**

Steve Goldfield '68, Oakland, Calif. – I lost all respect
Eileen Walsh Grennan '56J, Chicago – “YOU GET THE HELL OUT OF MY SCHOOL!”
Philip Bunnell '72, Corona, Calif. – Altruism, humanism, nonviolence
Seth Rubenstein '48, Brooklyn, N.Y. – The thinking of people ...
David N. Stern '66, Brooklyn, N.Y. – An enduring lesson
Don Engleman '68, Southlake, Texas – “You have a duty of scholarship”
Philip Guinsburg '68, Brentwood, Tenn. – It was a nightmare for me
Bill Hudgins '72, Gallatin, Tenn. – Nobody changed their minds
Bob Kirsch '68, Ossining, N.Y. – An attempt to move the world
Marc Arnold '70, Leonia, N.J. – I am proud of my participation
Edward J. Hyman '69, Berkeley, Calif. – Joyous conviction
Patrick O. Patterson '68, '72L, Fox Point, Wisc. – I learned to question authority

Letters July-August 2008:

Rich Forzani '66, Glen Rock, N.J.
Dr. Michael T. Charney '62, San Jose, Calif.
Lee J. Dunn Jr. '65, Boston
Jerry Oster '64, Chapel Hill, N.C.
Art Thomas '50, Greenwich, Conn.
Joseph Kushick '69, '75 GSAS, Amherst, Mass.
Don Beattie '51, Jacksonville, Fla.
George Jochnowitz '58, '60 GSAS, '67 GSAS,
New York City
Arthur “Grant” Lacerte Jr. '88, Kissimmee, Fla.
William A. “Bill” Hance '38, '49 GSAS, Professor
Emeritus, Nantucket, Mass.

Letters September-October 2008:

Lee Lowenfish '63, New York City
Matthew Mosesian '74, Salt Lake City, Utah
Dr. Jay Lefer '51, Larchmont, N.Y.
Jonathan J. Liebowitz '61, Littleton, Mass.
Charles C. Currie '48, Clarksville, Tenn.
Paul Saenger '66, Chicago
Ed Bergeson '48, '51 Arch., Portland, Ore.