On Campus

The Real Heroes of '68

One professor stands firmly with the quiet majority.

By |
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Student protesters enter Morningside Park in the spring of 1968 (Hugh Rogers Photography / Columbia College Today).

Before launching his attack on Low Library in April 1968, Mark Rudd led his band of SDS radicals down into Morningside Park to stage a demonstration against the proposed Columbia and community “Gym in the Park.” When he emerged from the park and reached Morningside Drive, he was holding aloft a banner that read, “To Rebel Is Justified.” Few of those who saw the photo of this in the Spectator the next

day knew who coined this battle cry.

It came from Mao Zedong, first in a call to his revolutionary cadres in the 1930s, and later reiterated at the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. That speech, titled "Stalin Is Our Commander," honored the leader of the world revolution that communism envisioned.

In the earlier version, Mao emphasized the differences between his revolution and the traditional civility of the Confucians. It was not to be a gentle tea party or a scholarly conversation, but a cause that both justified and demanded the use of force. At about the same time, he extended his critique of traditional civility to include those he scorned as bourgeois liberals. In a tract titled "Combat Liberalism," Mao belittled liberals as pantywaists who were quick to compromise and who did not have the guts to engage in fierce and prolonged class struggle. This prefigured Mao's later Cultural Revolution, which was coming to its devastating climax in China in 1968.

When Mark Rudd rallied his forces outside Low Library with the cry "Up Against the Wall, Motherfucker," he was not calling for negotiations or compromise. He would, he said, "Force Kirk and Truman to say NO." By this he meant that he did not want any kind of qualified answer from the administration, leaving the way open for a negotiated compromise. He wanted outright confrontation in which he would impose his demands on callow liberals who would submit to them rather than have a messy fight.

At the moment Low Library was being occupied, President Grayson Kirk was downtown, but asked Provost David Truman by phone to call in the police. Truman vacillated; he still hoped to negotiate, as did the majority of the faculty group with which I was meeting in Philosophy Hall at the time. (Truman eventually had to call in the police and that would prove even messier.)

Rudd and the SDS, in the form of strikes against the holding of classes and of regular academic ceremonies, challenged the University's defense of its civil rights, its due process, and its civil activities, especially the right of freedom of assembly (guaranteed by the Bill of Rights) to carry out its legitimate academic activities.

The strike was euphemistically called a "moratorium" as a sop to liberal sensibilities, but the picketing that actually enforced it was often threatening and coercive. On learning of the strike, I told my classes that I felt a contractual obligation to meet

with my students at a given time and place, and I would be there for any students who came. Virtually all of them did.

For taking this stand, the radicals castigated me as a “liberal fascist”; later, during the time of a brief occupation of Kent Hall, my office was ransacked. Items filched from my files later showed up in the Spectator.

Pickets even tried to prevent freedom of movement in and out of buildings for ordinary academic or personal purposes. When my daughter Catherine, then a student at Barnard, came to see me in Kent Hall, she was harassed and intimidated by the pickets, but braved the roughing up and finally got to my office. She was, and still is, a courageous woman, but once in the safe haven of my office that day, she collapsed in tears. Rudd’s tactics are not to be confused with Gandhian civil disobedience. Gandhi and Martin Luther King willingly paid the legal penalty for nonviolent protests; here it was others, not Rudd, who suffered the consequences of his violent disruptions.

Although there has been much romanticism about April 1968, a lot of this is sentimentality of the shallowest kind: References are made to the “students” in 1968 as if they were represented by the SDS. Nothing could be further from the truth. In every poll or election among the college students at the time, the SDS was shown to be a distinct minority. The real students — a majority — were those who turned out to support the school before Truman finally called in the police. It does a great disservice to student activism if its name is lent to the showy exploits of Mark Rudd rather than to the day-to-day public and community service of many other students who in quiet, unspectacular ways sought to sustain and improve the University and community. It was those who contributed regularly to extracurricular activities, athletic programs, and community service who should have been recognized as no less activist than the romanticized heroes of the ’68 riots.

Another group that deserves recognition in helping to save the University at that time is a faculty group that could not meet on campus (again, an abridgment of the civil right of assembly), and so met in Fritz Stern’s apartment on Claremont Avenue to discuss what the faculty could do to remedy the crisis. The group, which came to be known as the “Stern Gang,” included the historian Bill Leuchtenberg and professor of medicine Paul Marks, subsequently dean of the College of Physicians and Surgeons and later president of Memorial Sloan-Kettering. Although Lionel

Trilling and Richard Hofstadter were by that time not physically well enough to attend these meetings in Fritz's apartment, Fritz regularly consulted with them. Eventually the group bought a full-page advertisement in the New York Times in defense of academic freedom against the disruptions of the SDS.

I recall the words of Lionel Trilling at an earlier ad hoc meeting held in what was then called the Business Building. He referred to criticisms of the University on political grounds for not measuring up to what some might assert was the responsibility of a "great university" to play a more leading role in stopping the Vietnam War. Lionel said he did not know whether Columbia should claim or think of itself as a great university in that sense. It was enough for Columbia to be a "good university," simply doing well what universities were meant to do: impart and extend knowledge through its own processes of civil discussion, in the open and free exchange of ideas. On that basis, he said, Columbia, even just as a good university, was entitled to defend itself against attacks on its own right to function as a teaching and research institute with its own distinctive mission, not to "stop the war," but to provide an open forum for the discussion of public issues so the people and their elected representatives could decide what to do.

Trilling had it right.

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Columbia University in the City of New York