

■ This article explains the causes of university student riots, particularly those in Columbia and Paris.

## SAVAGE RAGE OF STUDENTS

Columbia University is an institution of great academic power and performance. It has not been served well by its chief executive officers since before the days when Dwight David Eisenhower used its presidency as a dry run for a bigger job. Its trustees — all men of position, distinction, financial resources, and significant connections — oversee the governance of the collection of colleges and graduate schools as though it were a “conglomerate” enterprise dealing in real estate, weaponry, and pharmaceuticals. They are in occasional communication with Grayson Kirk, who has served as Columbia’s president since the winter of 1951. Before troubles early this year, he had been contemplating his happy retirement.

President Kirk is known to have been on speaking terms with several members of the senior faculty, but he

has never evinced any pressing need for their support and counsel in the conduct of his office. The senior faculty, able and respected scholars all, in their turn have rarely indicated that they felt grievance because of their consequently light work load. They have been known on occasion to socialize with some of the junior faculty and a few especially bright graduate students. The junior faculty — most of them aged thirty, plus or minus five years — fraternize more freely with the students, share some of their insecurities, many of their dreams, and most of their anger against society in its various middle-aged, middle-class aspects.

The male graduate students have spent their undergraduate years sometimes in search of a “field” or “major” but always in a struggle to maintain a grade average high enough to withstand

the military draft and to assure themselves a place in one of Columbia's prestigious graduate schools. Now that they have achieved graduate status and have some notion about the best way to spend their lives, they are uncomfortably contemplating their imminent exposure to the newly democratized operations of the Selective Service process. This plight is shared by the graduating seniors of Columbia College and every other healthy young university man in the country.

Most of the students and some of the junior faculty share with their fellows elsewhere in the world an insatiable eagerness to make this world a little safer to live in and a little more generous to live through. They are generally better-educated and more intelligent than preceding student generations. They are less conforming, less respectful of mere authority, and more openly critical of anyone or any group that diminishes (in their judgment) the possibilities of improving the human condition.

They hate the war in Vietnam; they hate malfeasance in high office; they hate social and economic inequities; they hate compromise or expediency and deferral of payment on any moral debt. They believe that the world can be made better now, and are convinced that they could do the job, if they were better educated — but they feel that they have been victims of pedagogical malpractice. They have abundant and heavily documented evidence.

The protesting students have allies among the middle-aged, middle-class wielders of power and none more articulate than Harold Howe II, the United States Commissioner of Education. In a recent address to the American Association of University Professors he used language almost as harsh as the student's to present a bill of indictment every bit as precise as they would offer. He accused the professors and their associate administrators of neglecting the campus world to the detriment of their students: "The professors are largely responsible for the student's disenchant-

ment with their world." He accused the administrators of being "inadequate, and unreasonably inflexible" in their approach to the needs of students. He said that the professors do not teach very well and what they teach is not very relevant to the lives of their students. Finally, in warning the universities to initiate and accept change, the commissioner declared that he had learned from experience "... that the best way to accomplish anything is to aggravate somebody sufficiently to get him interested in taking action."

Columbia, as one of this nation's ancient seats of learning, possesses a substantial — though, of course, inadequate — endowment, almost half of which is in Manhattan real estate. This is some of the most valuable acreage on the planet. Since World War II, the university has been increasing its holdings in its near neighborhood for almost prudential reasons. It is in a period of very rapid physical growth. It has to attract talented and finicky new faculty, and must therefore make its surrounding community attrac-

tive to them. Unfortunately for this purpose, the surrounding community on the south, east, and north is Harlem, mostly Negro and Puerto Rican and nearly all very poor.

Every act of reclamation by the university is seen, with almost complete justification, to be an act of depredation against the poor of the neighborhood. Most of the belated attempts by Columbia, even with the alert largess of the Ford Foundation, to improve conditions of life for its surrounding poor have not been met with cries of joy.

It is almost irresistible to suggest that the causes of student unrest at the Sorbonne are generically related to those at Columbia — high academic pressures to meet the scholarly demands of "irrelevant" courses, overcrowded classrooms, unresponsive administrators, antiquated and inappropriate rules and regulations, and, of course, the demand for "participatory democracy."

The French university system, they declared, is supposed to be for free inquiry, but the Government wants the university to serve the

needs of business and industry. The students say that they do not want to become tomorrow's policemen; they do not want to become part of some impersonal world machine.

Initially, the population of Paris, which has rarely been sympathetic to students, went about its daily affairs muttering about the behavior of *les fils de papa*, the pampered sons of the *petit bourgeois*. The administration of the university became increasingly anxious, most especially about a tiny group of ultra-rightist students known as the Occident, whom the administration feared might attack the activists and precipitate a riot.

Thus on Friday, May 3, the Rector of the Sorbonne closed that ancient institution for the first time since its misty beginnings in the thirteenth century. The students responded with even more vigorous protests, and the administration, acting precisely as did that of Columbia University, called in the police, committing in the eyes of the students and the faculty an unpardonable sacrilege.

Never had the hallowed precincts of the Sorbonne been so desecrated. What followed was the feared bloody riot, in which thousands were injured, scores seriously, in which the "flics" the Paris police who have a capacity for brutality unmatched in this country, stormed the hastily erected barricades in the streets of the Latin Quarter. The French students, who, unlike their American counterparts, do not hesitate to do battle with the police, turned to the traditional weapon of revolutionary streets, the paving stones. When the smoke of the first engagement cleared and the people of Paris understood what had happened, they rose in support of the students, and the trade unions joined in a now united front to present General Charles de Gaulle with a 10th anniversary present of a general strike that has paralyzed the commerce and industry of France.

Both American and French students are clearly reacting against a profound malaise in their countries. The French students sees his gov-

ernment wasting its substance in attempting, quixotically, to become a significant nuclear power, at an intolerable cost to the quality of life in France. The American student, with the unavoidable evidence of the Vietnam war always before him, and with the so-called war on poverty faltering on every front because of what he sees as wrongly diverted funds, is in a savage rage against his government.

Youth needs allies with older necessary skills than it possesses. It needs people with practical knowledge of social plumbing. It needs the help of middle-class, middle-aged artisans who will not "study" them, who will unself-consciously join in the "restructuring" that every society must continually be

about if it is to become fairer than its history.

Today neither Columbia, nor the Sorbonne, nor any significant center of learning in the world is a true community of scholars. The "savage rage" of youth has given the universities the promise of an option to become such communities — to the extent that they enter fully into the world in which they exist, to the extent, in Robert M. Hutchin's phrase, they are willing to assume the salient role of critic of the society. It is for them to provide the data on ethics that the politician, the statesman, the priest, the soldier, and the city planner can act upon to make this world safe for the humane use of human beings. — *By Frank G. Jennings in the Saturday Review, June 15, 1968.*